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The Ten Pards; or, The Terror of Take-Notice.

BY T. C. HARBAUGH,

AUTHOR OF "PLUCKY PHIL," "ARKANSAW," "BILL BRAVO," "CAPTAIN APOLLO," "CAPTAIN BULLET," "OLD FROSTY," ETC., ETC.



"NO MAN COUNTS MY MONEY FOR ME!" CRIED BLAKE, DROPPING THE CARDS, BACKS UPWARD. "CAPTAIN QUARTZ, I AM
HERE TO PLAY ANY GAME YOU WISH!"

The Ten Pards;

OR,

The Terror of Take-Notice.

A Tale of Northwest Colorado.

BY T. C. HARBAUGH,

AUTHOR OF "MOUNTAIN DETECTIVE," "CAPTAIN BULLET," "BILL BRAVO," "BUCKSKIN DETECTIVE," "ARKANSAW," "OLD WINCH," "PLUCKY PHIL," "DANDY JACK," "CAPTAIN APOLLO," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE MAN FROM LEADVILLE.

"THEM's the elect I imagine, an' a purty set they ar', too. Don't I know 'em all as well as their mothers do? I wonder which one writ' that notice? Daisy Doll I expect, ez he's the youngest pard ov the hull lot, an' the only one I feel like treatin' fairly. So this kentry b'longs to them, eh? Wal, I've seen men badly fooled in my time, an' I hevn't lived very long, either. Jes' look at that notice, Ironclad! Doesn't it stir yer innards with disgust?"

The sun was going down behind one of the many rough mountain peaks to be found in the Northwestern corner of Colorado, and the man who had just spoken the words above faced a giant tree to which was fastened a piece of paper covered with poor writing and a variety of names.

He spoke the truth when he said he had not lived many years.

He was still on the sunny side of thirty, his face was tanned, his eyes were dark as midnight's gloom, and he had straight black hair like an Indian.

He did not wear garments that distinguished him from the men who generally frequent the mountain mines of the Great New West; they were principally buckskin without ornamentation, and fitted his well-developed figure to a nicety.

His sole visible weapon was a rifle which he carried across the saddle. It was a fire-arm which had seen a great deal of service, for it boasted of no polish, and in several places there were signs of rust.

His horse was not the handsomest representative of the equine family west of the Mississippi; he was gaunt of limb and somewhat ill-shaped, and one looking at him would have decided that the name Ironclad had not been misapplied.

"Them's the saints ov this region!" exclaimed the man again, after a moment's silence. "I'll call the roll ag'in fer yer amusement, Ironclad."

And he proceeded to read aloud the following notice, which had been affixed to the tree before him:

"HALT, AN' READ!"

"All intruders, re an' white, male an' female, are not'ed to keep away from Take-Notice, on pain o' death! are able to run things hyer with 'u any od' help, an' we've got ropes, bowies, an' bullets ... all that disobeys this paper. We mean izness from the word 'go,' an' woe to the fool that reads this, an' doesn't turn back! Our names ought to be enough to convince everybody."

(Signed,) DAISY DOLL,
"COLORADO PRINCE,
"SILVER FIST,
"PAWNEE PETE,
"DEVIL HEART,
"TRUMP CARD,
"BOWIE BILL,
"DEAD-DROP DAN,
"CAPTAIN QUARTZ,
"ROCKY RUBE."

It was an array of formidable names, and seemed, indeed, to suggest bowies, ropes, and bullets; but there was a twinkle of merriment in the eyes of the long-haired man while he read the warning.

"I'm goin' to be one of the fools they talk about, Ironclad," he said, when he had finished reading. "Daisy Doll wrote that notice, for his name comes first on the list, an' all the names are in the same handwritin'. Hyer goes fer Take-Notice, ez they call their place. Mebbe it isn't ez big as 'Frisco; but I'll venture that it's got more mean men in it to the squar' foot than any town west ov the Missouri."

With a parting look of contempt at the warning, which, as any one could see, had been posted in good faith by the men whose names were appended to it, the black-eyed man rode past the tree, and soon disappeared.

There was no turning back in him. Three miles further on he came suddenly upon six little log huts.

They stood in the shadows of the lofty mountains, for the sun had set by this time, and as he looked, there was suddenly borne to his ears the sound of boisterous laughter.

He drew rein and listened.

"The Ten Pards ar' enjoyin' themselves," he said. "Ef we move along, Ironclad, we'll get thar in time to laugh at the story."

He urged his horse forward again, and when near the first shanty he heard an exclamation of discovery, and the next instant he found himself in the midst of ten men.

Dark-faced and roughly-dressed fellows they were, without a single exception, giants in stature, and ferocious-looking enough to cow the bravest.

They seemed amazed at the appearance of the person who had ridden so quietly into camp.

"Look hyer, stranger, didn't you see the notice down the trail?" suddenly asked one. "We are the daisies that signed it. Ain't we the purtiest mountain bouquet you ever set eyes on?"

The man in the saddle did not quail. If he had ridden into the jaws of death he had not done so unwarmed.

For a moment he seemed to study the faces beneath his; he returned the fierce looks with one of calm demeanor, and that when ten hands clutched the butts of as many revolvers.

"You saw the notice, but you wouldn't turn back," continued the spokesman of the Ten. "Yer curiosity hez brought you to Take-Notice. By Jove! you've got the kind that sometimes kills the possessor."

There was a latent threat in the desperado's language, and the man on the horse fixed his eyes upon him.

"I read the warnin', but I am here," he said. "I'm ready to play any game you propose, but my specialty is poker. How are you off for dust?"

His nonchalance disconcerted the Ten Pards of Take-Notice. They exchanged astonished glances, and a hurried whisper ran through the crowd.

"Strap him first, jest to see how he kin play. He kin carry out the notice afterward," they whispered.

The suggestion seemed to take, much to the satisfaction of the man in the saddle.

"We'll play you, pard," said one. "Jes' git down an' open up yer dust shop. Since you've come to Take-Notice, we'll accommodate ye. Climb down an' let's at it."

The stranger's eyes lit up with a gleam of joy, and he sprung to the ground with an exclamation of satisfaction.

"I hevn't hed a squar' game for a month," he declared. "I want you to pick yer best players, pards, fer I'm no slouch at poker, nor at anything else!"

He spoke the last words with a significance that might have attracted the attention of the suspicious; but they seemed to pass unnoticed.

When he stood on the ground he was a person slightly above medium height, but not the peer physically of one of the Ten Pards who watched him.

"Whar's yer ground?" he asked. "Produce the pasteboards an' let us try our hands."

"Come this way—what's yer name?"

"Blake—Bill Blake," was the reply.

"Whar you from?" asked several.

"Late'ov Leadville."

"What's become ov—"

The man hesitated and then stopped altogether as if the glance of the leader of the Ten had struck him dumb.

"I don't know whar he is," smiled Blake. "Thar's a lot of people in Leadville I don't know anything about, an' you fellers ar' apt to be acquainted with more than I am."

There was no response to this, and a minute afterward the crowd reached a hut across the threshold of whose open door the leader stepped.

The night was warm and not a breath of air was stirring. There were myriads of stars overhead, but not the sign of a moon.

"We'll try it out hyer," said the rough, reappearing at the door of the hut with a rough table about five feet long which he thrust forward endways. "It's too hot in thar fer all ov us, an' we kin play better hyer."

The table was placed on the ground and several torches were lighted and their ends stuck into holes in the logs which had doubtless been used for that purpose before.

The Pards of Take-Notice gathered round the table.

"Who's to play me?" asked Blake.

"Bowie Bill and Captain Quartz. Show yer dust, pard, ef ye've got any. It takes a pile to buck the tiger in Take-Notice."

Bill Blake turned to the horse which had followed him to the spot, and throwing up one of the skirts of the saddle, took from beneath it a well-filled leather wallet which contained not dust, but coin.

It was but a stride from the horse to the table and he dropped the wallet upon the board with an air of triumph.

"Cut fer deal—you an' me fer it," said Captain Quartz shoving toward Blake a pack of cards which had seen hard service.

Blake did so and turned up the ace of spades.

"It war aces once before," murmured Captain Quartz in tones that seemed to reach Blake's ears for he started slightly. "The highest always deals in Take-Notice; go on an' fling the kerds."

The visitor picked up the pack and began to shuffle with a rapidity that arrested the Pards' attention.

Stopping suddenly, he handed them to Captain Quartz to cut and then dealt them with the rapidity of a monte sharp.

"What's the stakes to start with?" he asked quietly.

"Ten."

Blake produced an eagle from the leather wallet and laid it on the table. Captain Quartz and Bowie Bill instantly covered it and the game proceeded.

Directly behind Blake stood the horse that had brought him to the place, and the torches that burned with a steady flame lighted up the scene.

Blake soon showed that he was no novice with cards; he played and bet with the coolness of an old blackleg and the men by whom he was almost completely surrounded discovered that their champions had met their match.

For an hour the game went on with varying fortunes, but Blake had the advantage.

At last the excitement ran high. Captain Quartz, with an oath which was a dare to Blake, threw upon the table a bag of dust which he thought oversized his adversary's pile.

"I go you a thousand better," observed Blake calmly. "Come here, Ironclad!"

The horse moved forward and Blake turned quietly around and took from beneath the other saddle-skirt a wallet not unlike the one first produced.

"Thar's a hundred 'Frisco eagles in thar bag," he said throwing it upon the stakes. "Raise me ef you kin."

Captain Quartz's eyes fairly flashed fire.

Bowie Bill glided to his side.

"Bluff 'im, cap'n!" he said in low whispers.

With his eyes still fixed on Blake, Captain Quartz moved his tawny hand across the table.

"We'll count it an' see," he said.

Instantly lightning seemed to dart from the visitor's eyes.

"You count my money? I guess not!" he said.

"I've counted it myself—"

"We'll count it ag'in."

The hand of Captain Quartz fell upon the stakes as he finished, but, quick as the lightning's flash, it was knocked aside, and the Leadville sport leaned across the table.

"No man counts my money for me!" cried Blake, dropping the cards, backs upward. "Captain Quartz, I am here to play any game you wish!"

The dark eyes of Blake glowed madly, and he leaned far across the rough table flashing their lightning glare into the desperado's face without a weapon in his hand nor the sign of one about his person.

All at once he straightened and laid his left hand on his gold.

"This is mine until it has been won from me," he announced. "The man who attempts to count my eagles dies where he stands!"

Captain Quartz's eyes seemed about to fly from his head, and all eyes were upon him.

"We'll play 'er through," he said, biting his nether lip under his heavy mustache. "Show the hand you've beenbettin' on ef you dare."

Blake quietly turned up his hand and displayed four kings; Captain Quartz did the same revealing a pair of aces and trys.

The visitor with his eyes fixed on the desperado quietly raked in the stakes.

"I've won my first victory to-night," he said to himself. "I've cowed the head lion in his den. There are braver men here than Captain Quartz, but he's got to die like the rest of them. Ten against one! I accept the odds."

CHAPTER II.

ELUDING THE LIONS.

MARVELOUS to relate, not a hand was raised against the man from Leadville as he stepped back to his horse.

He seemed totally unarmed, yet the Ten Pards of Take-Notice could not believe that he had entered their midst in this manner.

Seemingly regardless of danger he coolly returned the leathern wallets to their accustomed places under the saddle, he having already transferred to his pockets much of the dust won from Captain Quartz and Bowie Bill, and then mounted the horse.

"Goin' off, eh?" cried the captain, springing madly forward like a mastiff that had broken his chain. "You've won more money in Take-Notice to-night than any other man ever did. Have you forgotten what the warnin' on the tree said?"

Bill Blake must have seen the cocked revolver clutched by the rough's tawny hand.

"Yes, I'm goin' away," he answered, almost defiantly. "I didn't agree to play all night."

"Why did you come hyer—to fleece us?"

"No. I play a fair game generally."

"Ginerally! Thet means that you cheat sometimes," growled Captain Quartz.

"I play as fair as those who pit themselves ag'in me."

"That's a lie! Thar war six kings in that deck, but you had four ov 'em in yer last hand an'!"

"An' you had the other two up yer sleeve, eh?"

"No, I hed three thar—four an' three ar' seven, they say."

Blake's eyes twinkled half mischievously.

"Wal, cap'n," he said, "seven kings and six aces in one pack beats all I ever heard of!"

"Six aces?"

"No more, no less. See here! that war what I'd call a cold deck."

Captain Quartz's friends were inclined to laugh at his discomfiture; but not so the captain himself.

"By heavens! you don't leave Take-Notice till I say go," he hissed, covering the distance between himself and Blake by a single stride.

"You've cheated me out ov—"

"How much?" interposed the man from Leadville.

"A thousand, at least. Make it all right, er by thunder I'll chaw you up!"

"Whar's yer list ov victims?" asked Blake, looking down into the face of the irate desperado.

"I'll show you if you don't make things even. I'm Captain Quartz, an' I've killed more men than you've got fingers an' toes. Shell out my thousand! I never stand on ceremony. This is Take Notice, my man, an' don't you forget it!"

There was no reply.

All present saw that a crisis was at hand. Captain Quartz stood at the saddle, the picture of rage, and ready to bring events to an encounter.

"Want your money back, eh?" queried Blake. "I'm always willin' to accommodate a squealer, an' I'm afraid I wouldn't sleep well to-night if I kept yours. A thousand you said it was?"

"About that," snapped the captain.

The man from Leadville bent over and lifted one of the saddle-skirts.

A moment later he straightened up, holding one of the leathern wallets in his hands.

"About a thousand, you say?" he said, echoing Captain Quartz's words. "This money came from the Leadville banks, an' I guess it's right; but you shall count it yourself."

With the last word, he suddenly lifted the wallet, and leaning forward as he completed the action, he delivered a lightning stroke which landed the thousand in gold squarely in Captain Quartz's face!

The chief of the Ten Pards reeled away with blood spurting from a wound inflicted by the wallet.

"There's your thousand!" grated Blake, straightening himself again. "Now, gentlemen of Take-Notice, if that mean coward hasn't got what he deserves, I'm here to give him more."

The crowd stood speechless, although several revolvers were drawn.

Blake touched his horse's flanks, but kept his flashing eyes turned upon the hard lot while the animal bore him off.

A sudden impulse carried the crowd forward. The Pards of Take-Notice seemed to realize, suddenly, that a dangerous man was going to get away unscathed.

"Keep off!" he warned. "I'm not as harmless as I look. I don't care a snap for the warnin' on the tree, an' less than that for the men that put it thar. Go an' tend that fellow yonder. I think he couldn't scent a mountain daisy just now. But if you will fight, I'm yer man."

He drew up his feet as he concluded, and in a flash the pards of Take-Notice were looking into the muzzles of two revolvers.

The man from Leadville had drawn them from his boots!

"I've got more right to yer lives, yer worthless skunks, than any man livin'!" he continued, this time sending his words at them between the revolvers. "Did you hear Cap'n Quartz say that it war aces once afore, when I turned the aces to-night? I did. Have you men forgotten when that time was? I have not!"

The nine Pards looked amazed.

"Forgotten it, eh? I thought so. I'll bet all my dust that Cap'n Quartz will think of it when he recovers! I'm not the man to quit Take-Notice because the skunks that hung my brother want me to go!"

A startling exclamation burst from the crowd.

"War that chap yer brother?" asked a voice.

"My only brother at that. He was younger than me by ten years. I came too late to the fatal spot. You were the Pards ov Gold-leaf Valley then; now you have given a new handle to a town in Colorado, an' say death to red or white who invades it. I am hyer—I, Bill Blake, the brother of the boy you hanged because he held four aces. I'm tempted to let loose on ye with my pistols. I've got you at my mercy, men of Take-Notice! One of ye stir er lift a hand, and I'll send ye to jine the pards gone before."

Covered as they were by the outstretched revolvers of the avenging brother, the nine desperadoes recoiled instead of advancing.

"I didn't come hyer to kill to-night. I wanted to make certain of you first; I wanted to see that you war all hyer, fer I wouldn't take the life of an innocent man for the world. You're all hyer. Justice hez spared ye all fer me! You may post a thousand warnings; they can't frighten Bill Blake. Good-night, men. Hunt me. I wish you would, for I swear in the sight of Heaven that I am here to kill the Ten Pards of Take-Notice!"

A cry of madness and defiance was the reply.

"Now, Ironclad!" said Blake to his horse as he touched him with the spur, and when the roughs reached the spot where they expected to meet the intruder, they saw him not, and heard only the galloping of his horse.

In a second, as it were, he had passed beyond the light of the torches sticking in the logs of the cabin.

A set of madder men than the desperadoes of Take-Notice never listened to the sound of hoofs before.

"Gone! slipped through our fingers like an eel!" hissed Bowie Bill. "What does the warnin' amount to if we fail to tend to the first man who has disobeyed it? Thet man, the young booby's brother we hanged last year! He'll give us trouble if we don't hunt 'im down at once."

By this time Captain Quartz had recovered sufficiently to gain his feet.

He came forward with blood-shot eyes, swollen face, and almost bursting from madness.

"Whar is he? Show me the man what gave me back my thousand dollars with the interest of blood."

"He's gone, cap'n."

Captain Quartz stood stock-still.

"Did he say who he war afore he went off?" he finally demanded.

"Yes. He's the brother ov the lad that held the aces on you last summer."

"He is?"

"That's what he said."

"He's huntin' vengeance, then?"

"That's about the size of it!"

"This is a boss field fer it," ground the captain. "There ar' ten ov us an' we all hed a hand in the boy's takin' off. Hello! Daisy Doll!"

A well-built young man—the youngest member of the Ten Pards—stepped from the group.

"I want you to draw up another paper," said Captain Quartz, addressing him. "Say on it that we're ready to meet Bill Blake an' all his backers, an' add that we're glad we pulled the young card sharp up. Git it up in takin' language, Daisy, fer I'm b'ilin' to meet the fellar that hez just left ther camp. Sign all our names to it ez ye did to the other notice. Make it strong—strong enough to hurt. By the eternal

stars! Take-Notice is goin' to win in this game ov human hearts."

Daisy Doll promised to draw up the document requested.

"Do it to-night—now!" ordered Captain Quartz. "I'll give you my veins fer an ink-bottle ef ye say so. Go to yer shanty an' fix it up right away. I want to post it under the warnin' before daylight."

Daisy Doll did not reply but walked away, and entered one of the half a dozen log huts that constituted Take-Notice.

He was the handsomest as well as the youngest of the ten big men of the mountain den.

"Another document," he ejaculated. "I could surprise my pards with a revelation that would almost lift them off their feet, but let it go. It would be worth my life to let the secret out at this stage of the game. I have kept it for a year, an' I will keep it until I see what is likely to be the outcome of Bill Blake's blood-hunt. Yes, I'll go to the notice, captain, but it will not scare anybody."

He at once took himself to the task to which he had been assigned, and a few minutes later produced a paper which Captain Quartz would have pronounced "strong."

Daisy Doll read it aloud to see how it would sound.

"Who is that expected to scare?" said a voice that startled him.

The young giant of Take-Notice sprung to the door that stood open and rushed out.

"Who asked me that question?" he queried while he stood in the starlight with his hand on his revolver. "You needn't be afraid ov me. I'll answer ye squarely ef ye'll show yerself."

"I'll trust you for once," came the reply and the next moment there stepped to the giant's side a girlish figure at which he stared like a man in a maze.

"Do I frighten you?" asked a silver-toned voice. "Why, I'm not half as big as you are."

Daisy Doll found his tongue at last.

"I know that, but, my God! where did you spring from?"

"See here! I'm asking questions, not answering them," was the quick reply. "You said you would tell me who you wrote that notice for. Now keep your word like a man."

"I will, girl. I wrote it for more than one man, perhaps, but especially for a chap who calls himself Bill Blake."

"Bill Blake?" echoed the girl. "Did you ever hear of his brother Ned?"

Daisy Doll caught the girl's arm.

"What do you know about Ned Blake?" he cried. "Why he's the boy—"

The young giant paused abruptly as though on the verge of disclosing a secret.

"Ho! you needn't stop," laughed the girl. "Ned's the one you hanged last summer. I thought you knew him. Daisy Doll, I advise you and your pards to look out for Ned Blake's ghost," and breaking from the giant's grip the strange girl disappeared in the darkness.

CHAPTER III.

LASSOED AND LOST.

DAISY DOLL stood amazed and speechless for a minute on the spot where the girl left him.

"Who is she? What does she want hyer, an' whar did she come from?" he suddenly exclaimed. "I've lived hyer fer a year an' I never heard ov her afore to-night. Ned Blake's ghost, eh? We've got to look out for it, she says. The one that just left Take-Notice called himself Bill Blake. He war no ghost, but flesh an' blood. But that gal? She puzzles me, an' I'm goin' to diskiver something about her ef I can."

The youngest of the Pards re-entered the cabin and bid under his buckskin jacket the second warning he had written at Captain Quartz's request, then, adding an additional revolver to his equipment, he left the place and moved away in the direction taken by the girl.

"That gal struck me favorably," he muttered. "She's been hyer some time, fer didn't she call me Daisy Doll ez though we had met afore?"

Five minutes later the man from Take-Notice had the cabins at his back, and he stood among the gloomy shadows of the mountains, but he had not found the one he sought.

All at once a noise like a human footstep sounded on his ears and he instinctively laid his hand on his revolver.

"Somebody's out yonder," he muttered to himself. "I've lived long enough to tell a bar's step from a man's. Mebbe Bill Blake's prowlin' around yet, not satisfied with what he did at Take-Notice to-night."

Daisy Doll stood perfectly still for five min-

utes, at the end of which time he strode impatiently forward.

"Might ez well settle it one way er the other," he growled. "Ef the prowler ar' out thar I'll stir 'im up. I've stirred man an' beast afore."

Daisy Doll thought he knew the precise spot from whence the noise had emanated; two lengthy strides carried him almost to it.

"That's far enough, Daisy," was said, and a rope dropped upon the giant's shoulders.

The desperado started back, but the lasso instantly tightened, and he was almost jerked off his feet.

"Remember last summer's work!" was hissed in his ears. "Daisy Doll, the doom of the Pards of Take-Notice has been spoken. Now, Rainbow, do your duty!"

Before the giant could wonder who Rainbow was, he was thrown violently to the ground and the next instant was being dragged over it without the least show of ceremony.

"My God! I am to be dragged to death at the heels of a horse!" passed through his mind as he clutched the hairy lasso with both hands and tried to prevent it from choking him to death.

The lassoer had not spoken since his words to Rainbow, which was undoubtedly the name of the dumb executioner, and Daisy Doll of Take-Notice found himself pulled over the mountain trail which was by no means a marvel of smoothness.

He clung for life to the rope which he could not break; his only hope was to keep it from choking him, and retain his senses until the avenger, whoever he was, should reveal himself.

Daisy Doll knew the trail over which he was being dragged. It led toward the summit of the mountain, but far below the treeless peak itself it reached its highest level from which point it descended toward the valley on the other side of the mountain.

In several places the trail ran along the very edge of precipices that overlooked deep abysses, and Daisy Doll shuddered as he thought that he might fall over the verge, and the lasso cut by the rocks burst in twain, sending him down to a most horrible doom.

The giant kept the terrible cord from choking him to death, and harbored as best he could his energies for an encounter with his merciless captor when it should please him to draw rein and look at his victim.

On, on up the mountain went the horse, dragging Daisy Doll at his heels, and tearing the young giant's garments to shreds.

"By heavens! my time will come," grated the desperado. "I will come out of this tussle on top an' the stars shall shine on Daisy Doll's vengeance afore dawn, not on yours, Bill Blake."

The man who had lassoed Daisy Doll was Bill Blake, then—the cool fellow who had played a game of cards with Captain Quartz in Take-Notice, and then knocked him senseless with a bag of golden eagles.

This is what the giant thought.

"Hyer's the edge ov the cliff," muttered the captive. "I wish Bill Blake would stop hyer an' give me a chance. Thar'd be fun ef he would oblige me in this."

At that instant to Daisy Doll's surprise the horse stopped for the first time since his capture.

The giant lay on his back sore in every joint, and with his fingers clutching the rope he had kept from his throat.

He heard somebody alight on the ground as if he had sprung from a saddle, and a figure came toward him.

"My time will come now," murmured Daisy Doll. "He will see if it kills a man to lasso him and drag him over the mountain. I'm worth a dozen dead men yet, I am. Ha! hyer you ar'."

Daisy Doll saw the figure of a man stoop over him, and holding his breath he shut his eyes.

A hand in fingering the rope touched his throat and the eager desperado almost betrayed himself by starting.

"This is the first one," said the lassoer, as he slipped the noose over the giant's head. "The other nine will follow him in rapid succession. The oath I have recorded in heaven I will keep to the letter. Take-Notice, as they call their place, shall become the abode of mountain owls. I was not mistaken. This one is Daisy Doll, the least guilty one of the Ten, but I had to begin with one, and it might as well be him."

A hand was slipped beneath the front of the giant's jacket.

"Feelin' fer my heart, eh? It will betray me in a second. I must work!"

The searching hand was on the point of discovering that life still remained in Daisy Doll's breast, when the giant's arms flew upward and in the twinkling of an eye encircled the lassoer's neck!

"I'm no corpse!" grated the giant, as he struggled to his feet despite the lassoer's efforts to break loose. "I hold the trump cards just now, my mountain snake. How do you like yer prospects just at this minute? Goin' to exterminate the Ten Pards ov Take-Notice, eh? That's what you said, I b'lieve. It's ruther unfortunate that ye begun on me—don't you think so?"

If the journey over the mountain trail at the end of a lasso had bruised Daisy Doll, revenge made him forget his soreness and gave him strength.

He had succeeded in finding his enemy's throat in the uncertain light, and it was not his intention to spare.

"I don't look much like the first victim now, do I?" continued the Colorado giant, seeing that the other did not speak. "I hold all the aces in the deck, an' you might as well toss up yer hand. You needn't talk. I don't want words, fer I mean bizness. You have just called me the least guilty ov all the Ten. Mebbe I am, because I went back *afterward* an' did you a good turn. Still, I am to die with the rest ov 'em. Wal, we'll see."

Daisy Doll forced his captive to the very edge of the trail.

Below it was an abyss of darkness which no eye could penetrate.

"Jump!" said the giant suddenly releasing the lassoer's throat and stepping back a few inches. "I'll count five for you, my snake. If you stand thar when I finish I'll throw you ez far from the trail ez I kin!"

Silence followed Daisy Doll's last words.

He could see his enemy's slight, boyish figure, a great contrast to his own, and marked that no more than two feet separated it from the edge of the precipice.

"You'll never git to settle with Take-Notice, I'm thinkin'," suddenly blurted Daisy Doll. "The other one war thar to-night, but we'll git the drop on him afore long. It doesn't pay to buck ag'in' the pards ov Take-Notice. We kin eucher the devil out ov his own. Now, I've said my say; hyer goes fer the countin' One—"

Daisy Doll paused suddenly for the person on the edge of the cliff had raised his hand.

"Say yer say," said the giant; "but be quick about it."

"I have but a word. I hate you all!"

"I know that."

"I have sworn to rid the world of the Ten Pards of Take-Notice."

"But you don't expect to now, do you?"

"The oath will be fulfilled!"

"You're a fool!" cried the giant. "Why, you're standin' now on the edge ov a trail that overlooks what we call the Valley ov Death. You're goin' to leap into the dark when I give the order. Mebbe you don't expect to fulfill the oath yerself."

"I will keep it to the letter!"

A cold, derisive laugh broke from Daisy Doll's throat.

"I've seen fools afore, but you take the cake!" he exclaimed. "You talk like a lunatic, too. Thar'll be buzzards to morrow whar you strike to-night, an' in the Valley ov Death you end yer trail with the Ten Pards ov Take-Notice all safe an' sound. I won't listen to any move ov yer palaver. Grit yer teeth an' jump before I count five. One—two—three—four—"

Daisy Doll held in his breath and started toward his oath-bound enemy.

He was going to keep his word and hurl him from the cliff if he did not jump of his own accord at sound of the fifth numeral.

"Five!—jump! er be thrown off!" suddenly thundered the giant.

The avenger retreated a step and then disappeared from Daisy Doll's sight so suddenly that the giant recoiled with an exclamation of horror.

"I paid 'im back fer lassoin' me!" he said. "The gal told me to look out fer Ned Blake's ghost. Mebbe I'll hev to hereafter," and the speaker laughed.

Then he leaned over the cliff and listened, with every sense on the alert.

"He went cl'ar down; I can't hear a sound," he said. "I wouldn't hev that tumble for a world ov gold—no, not fer— My God! am I goin'—to—foller him?"

Well might these startling words ring from Daisy Doll's lips.

The edge of the cliff had given way beneath

his chest, and with horror at his heart, he was trying to save his life by clinging to the tickle ground.

It was a moment of horror!

The giant did not speak again.

More than half of his body hung over the dark abyss, and he was struggling with all his might to draw himself up again.

No man in a similar situation ever worked so hard before.

The young giant of Take-Notice did not want to follow the person he had just forced over the brink.

"Who's doin' all this tusslin'?" suddenly called out a voice above him, and Daisy Doll saw a figure between him and the stars.

"I am. Give me a lift, pard, an' I'll return the compliment some day."

"I can't, till I know you."

"I'm Daisy Doll, of Take-Notice camp."

"You ar'? You one of the Ten Pards down thar?"

"I am."

"Then, by heavens! I'll help you to the bottom of the Valley of Death!"

The next instant a cinched hand struck the desperado in the face; but he clung to the cliff.

Again and again that hand smote as madly as it could, until, with an outlaw's curse, the mountain giant broke his grip, and fell!

CHAPTER IV.

THE HUNT FOR DAISY DOLL.

"WHAR'S Daisy? That's what puzzles me."

"Ain't he in the shanty?"

"He's gone, revolvers an' all. Go an' look fer yerself, Bowie."

"I'll take yer word fer it, cap'n."

"No. I want you to be satisfied. Foller me."

Bowie Bill strode after the burly form of his friend and companion, Captain Quartz, and did not halt until he stood beyond the threshold of the shanty that partly belonged to Daisy Doll.

"He's not hyer, cap'n—that's cl'ar ez day. Look at that couch; he didn't touch it last night."

"Thet's what I thought when I looked in hyer ten minutes ago. I sent him hyer to draw up a notice to be posted under the one he wrote afore, an' that's the last I've seen ov Daisy. Mebbe he went off to post the notice, an' staggered ag'in' the skunk what came to Take-Notice last night. I never thought of that afore."

Captain Quartz left the cabin and started off at a rapid gait.

"I'll go with you, cap'n," said Bowie Bill. "It strikes me thet we men ov Take-Notice hev got to stick close together from now on."

Neither of the men stopped until both stood in front of the tree that held the warning published in our first chapter.

It was alone.

"I'm stumped!" ejaculated Captain Quartz. "Daisy never took such a shoot afore. How does it strike you, Bowie?"

Bowie Bill, a man of few words, did not reply.

"Give me an opinion ov some kind. I want it!" said the captain.

"I've got none."

"You hevn't, eh?"

"I hevn't."

"I hev, an' it's to the effect thet Bill Blake got the drop on Daisy Doll. Back to Take-Notice! We'll rouse the boys an' play the bloodiest hand thet war ever played in this kentry. Don't I owe him one fer last night's work? It isn't every man thet kin get knocked down with a thousand in gold; but I don't boast ov the fact, Bowie. We go back to camp from hyer."

Captain Quartz whirled on his heel with the last word and led Bowie Bill a mad race back to the mountain camp.

"No playin' now!" he cried, bursting in upon a number of men who were gambling in one of the six huts. "Bill Blake has got the drop on Daisy Doll."

The gamblers were on their feet in a moment.

"Whar is he?" asked the men in chorus.

"Show us Bill Blake the card sharp's brother."

"We've got to find him, but we'll do it!" answered the captain. "We war fools fer lettin' him git away last night, but mebbe we couldn't help it—I don't know. The snake hez crept into Take-Notice, an' we've got to crush it. It's ten men ag'in' one, an' we kin do it."

"Ten, cap'n? You're countin' Daisy Doll, ain't you?"

"No. I'm two men now."

In the early dawn of another rare summer

day the nine men stood in front of the cabin armed to the teeth and eager to begin the work of revenge.

They all believed that the missing man had fallen into Blake's hands, and they mentally swore that the avenger should not boast of his victory long.

"Strike the trail while it's fresh—that's what I say," said Captain Quartz, and leaving no one in the camp, away they went toward the mountains.

Did fate guide them to the trail over which we have seen Daisy Doll dragged at a horse's heels.

"Lassoed, by thunder!" exclaimed the bronzed leader of the nine. "Look! hyer ar' pieces ov his clothes—torn off by the rocks an' roots. I didn't think Bill Blake would take that turn on 'im, but it's ez plain ez day to me, boys. Poor Daisy! but we'll make it hot fer the white-livered dog."

The trail was easily followed and the Pards of Take-Notice pushed rapidly on with weapons ready for any emergency and fingers itching to work the triggers.

"Halt! we're hyer!" said Captain Quartz, and the company at his back stopped on the spot of the parting of Daisy Doll and his lassoe. "Hyer's whar the game war played out." And the speaker pointed to the broken ledge of cliff which silently told a story terrible enough to make them shudder.

Captain Quartz knelt and looked down the almost perpendicular wall.

The Valley of Death lay beneath him, with the sunlight upon its rich grasses and little spots of green here and there.

"I see su'thin' away down yonder," he said over his shoulder to his anxious companions. "It looks like a man, an' I can't see it move, either."

"Mebbe it's Daisy."

"By my soul! I hope not. Stay hyer. I'll go down an' see."

Captain Quartz rose and hurried up the trail.

The place was not new to him, and he found a narrow trail that seemed to lead down to the valley.

"If it ar' Daisy, he's wiped clean out," he murmured as he picked his way down. "Woe to Bill Blake! We'll make this kentry too hot to hold him. We—!"

"Halt, Captain Quartz!"

At sound of the command, the chief of the men of Take-Notice drew back with his hand at his revolver, and stared at the person who had uttered it.

It was a young girl not more than seventeen, with a sylph-like figure, oval face, and the bluest eyes imaginable.

She wore a braided buckskin frock that reached to below her knees, and her leggings of the same material touched a pair of dainty moccasins.

There was something romantic and striking in the girl's appearance, but Captain Quartz did not note her beauty, so astonished he was.

"Halt, must I?" he said. "Who are you, an' why must Cap'n Quartz obey you?"

A smile wreathed the girl's lips.

"There are two men down yonder," she said, sending a rapid glance down the trail. "You might not fare very well if you went all the way down. Who am I? If I told you, you would not know, Captain Quartz. Call me White Leaf, if you must name me. That is my Indian name."

"But you're a white girl."

"You can see that, then?"

"Of course I kin. The other day I found a bouquet in the mountains, and I wondered who put the flowers togerher. It was you?"

"Maybe so. Captain, I don't want your life, but you might lose it by keeping on. Go back! Your comrades are up yonder. I say there are two men where you saw but one from the cliff."

"I don't care ef that's a thousand. I'm Cap'n Quartz, girl!"

"And Captain Quartz can be a fool," was the answer. "Go back!"

"Never!"

The girl stepped resolutely into the captain's path.

"You shall not go down yonder," she declared. "I may have an interest in one of the two men in the Valley of Death. If you will go back I promise you that Daisy Doll, as you call him, will see Take-Notice again."

"Ha! you don't want me to see the other party—that's it, White Leaf! Don't I know that it's Bill Blake? They tumbled off the cliff

last night, did they? An' they're both down thar in a bad fix! I can't see through a stone wall, girl, but I'm good at guessin'. I can't go back."

Captain Quartz closed his lips with determination behind the final word.

He took a step forward with his mad eyes fixed on the girl.

"I'll do it if you make me!" she said sternly, and the captain found himself covered by a revolver. "You hold your life in your own hands. I don't want it. It is not mine to take, but by the heaven above us! if you advance another step toward the valley I'll send a bullet through your brain!"

The tone in which White Leaf's words were spoken checked the captain's onward movement.

He ground his teeth behind his bloodless lips.

"I kin go up to the boys an' fetch 'em down hyer in less than ten minutes," he said, "er I kin signal 'em to come down."

"You may go back and tell them, but a signal will make me press the trigger. Go back!"

"By Jove! I will!" flashed the man from Take-Notice. "We'll all be down hyer shortly, an' we'll find the two men you talk about. Is Daisy Doll dead?"

"You shall see!"

"I'll go back an' get the boys."

Captain Quartz turned his back on the revolver that menaced him, and returned up the trail.

"She's a dandy, an' thar war 'shoot' in her eye," he said to himself. "Things ar' gittin' interestin'. Two men down yonder? It's not hard to guess who they ar'. One's Daisy an' the other is Bill Blake."

Captain Quartz soon disappeared from the girl in the trail, and a few minutes later he appeared suddenly to the eight bronzed men on the trail above.

"Come! I've found Daisy an' Bill Blake, too!" he exclaimed.

The nine went down the narrow path pell-mell together, and burst like a cyclone into the Valley of Death.

"Hyer's Daisy!" exclaimed Bowie Bill, halting beside a man who lay in the grass. "Whar's Bill?"

Daisy Doll's eyes flashed.

"I'm sorry to say you're five minutes too late, boys," he said.

"Too late! no!" cried Captain Quartz.

"But you ar'. The gal holds the best hand thus far!"

The retort was a score of curses.

CHAPTER V.

AN INTERRUPTED DUEL.

CAPTAIN QUARTZ and his pards looked sorely disappointed notwithstanding the fact that they had found Daisy Doll alive.

White Leaf, the girl, had removed the other tenant of the Valley of Death before they could finish him with their revolvers.

"Hang me if I know how I got down hyer alive," said the young giant. "I war lookin' over the trail up thar last night tryin' to hear suthin' ov the chap I had sent before me when all at once the ground begun to give way an' partly over I went. But I got a grip on the earth thar war pretty firm, an' might be crawled up ef I hadn't been knocked loose by a mean skunk what come along just then."

"Who war he?"

"Who but the hound thet hit Cap'n Quartz last night!"

"Not Bill Blake?" exclaimed the captain himself.

"It warn't nobody else."

"Then who did you send over the cliff?"

Daisy Doll smiled knowingly.

"Thet's a secret I'd like to keep fer the present," he said.

The nine Pards exchanged looks of amazement.

"I don't like secrets among us," said Bowie Bill. "What one ov us knows ther rest hev a claim to."

"Mebbe so," said Daisy Doll, half-defiantly. "I'll call it my secret anyhow, an' keep it fer awhile."

"Thet's not fair."

"Fair er not, I keep it—thar!"

Daisy Doll's lips shut firmly behind his decision, and from under Bowie Bill's black lashes shot a look of dark displeasure.

The two Pards had never been the best of friends, probably because their natures were

not exactly alike, and their little bickerings and jealousies had more than once made them allmost open enemies.

"I never knowed what saved me till daylight," resumed Daisy Doll, glancing up at the cliff far above the little valley. "When thet bound broke my hold last night, I shut my eyes an' gave the hell thing up. Why not? All at once I struck suthin' thet seemed to bend with me, an' then I knowed nothin' more till I opened my eyes hyer in the grass. Away up yonder's a tree growin' out from the bank. I struck its top an' it bent with me enough to let me off thar whar the wall slopes; then I must hev rolled to the grass hyer. Thar war no other way fer me."

"But the fellow you pushed off?"

"I didn't push him; he jumped ov his own accord," answered Daisy Doll, with a grim smile. "I guess the tree helped him the same way, fer when I got to lookin' around I saw 'im lyin' in the grass about forty yards off, with his eyes upturned toward the trail ez ef he expected to see some one up thar."

"An' the gal took him off?"

"Yes—on a hoss."

Captain Quartz ground his teeth.

"She got ther drop on me when I didn't hev any idea thar war a gal like 'er within fifty mile ov me," he grated. "But just wait. Men ov Take-Notice, we're in fer a tussle with somebody besides Bill Blake, fer Daisy hyer acknowledges thet thar ar' two men in the trouble, an' one ov 'em he won't name."

Bowie Bill thrust his head toward the speaker's right shoulder.

"Well make him talk ef you give the wink, er p'n," he said in low whispers. "Say the word, an' Daisy will tell the truth afore we move."

Captain Quartz made no reply.

"Ar' you afraid, cap'n?" continued Bill.

At that moment Daisy Doll caught the whisperer's eye, and noted his position.

"Hyer, Pawnee, help me up," he said to one of the nine. "Thar! now hold me a minute—that's the way."

He had not taken his eyes from Bowie Bill for a second.

"Captain Quartz, toss up a dollar ef you hev one," he said. "Tails fer Bowie; heads fer me."

The desperadoes looked astonished, and Captain Quartz hesitated.

"Toss ter up! It's bound to come some time, a tussle twixt Bowie an' me, an' what's the use ov deferrin' the time?"

"Yes!" almost thundered Bowie Bill, advancing a stride. "Toss up the piece. By heaven! I'm ready to hunt for the heart ov the Pard thet keeps a secret from the men ov Take-Notice. Throw the silver toward the sky. Tails, I choose weapons; heads, he does."

The two Pards stood face to face, scarcely ten feet apart.

Although Daisy Doll had not recovered from his wild adventure of the previous night, and his face was white, he no longer received support from Pawnee Pete's stalwart frame; but stood erect with a look that was a challenge to his rival.

"Ef you will fight, I'll toss the dollar up," said Captain Quartz.

"Fight it is!" was the response. "Up with the silver!"

Captain Quartz stepped back a pace with a bright, new American silver dollar in his hand.

"Fair play, cap'n," said one of the bronzed spectators. "Give it the spin when you let it go."

The next moment the piece was sent spinning into the air and quickly dropped on the trampled grass before the mountain roughs.

The whole crowd bent forward to note the result.

"You've won, Bowie," said Daisy Doll, rising and catching Bowie Bill's flashing and triumphant eyes. "What is it?"

"This!" and there leaped from the sheath that rested on the speaker's hip a bowie whose mighty length of blade had given the owner his name—Bowie Bill.

Never was the choice of weapons accepted with more alacrity than at that time.

"I am with you!" shot Daisy Doll from between clinched teeth, and a second later the toes of the roughs almost touched as they stood face to face armed with the steel blades of the mountain frontier.

They looked like modern gladiators, each man a giant in stature, broad-chested and uncouth, but not unhandsome, for nature had given them magnificent physiques and clear, black eyes.

The lookers-on stepped back and formed a ring around the men.

"I'll give you one chance, Daisy," suddenly said Bowie Bill. "I don't really want yer blood. We ar' citizens ov Take-Notice, an', to tell ther truth, we oughtn't to be hyer with bowies drawn ag'in' one another. Tell us who the other fellar war an' I'll put up my knife."

A gleam of disdain lighted up Daisy Doll's eyes.

"Tell it to keep you from fightin' me!" he hissed. "We've been together fer ten years, an' you don't know me yet. I didn't think it met, Bowie. Cap'n, I'm ready fer the signal. Drop yer hat."

Captain Quartz stepped toward the duelists with his hat in his hand.

"I'll count two an' then drop the hat," he said.

As he spoke he held the hat up to the gaze of all, and the two men braced themselves for the duel.

A moment's silence followed and then—

It was not broken by Captain Quartz's words, but by the sharp, shrill crack of a rifle and Bowie Bill reeled back through the grass like a man shot through the head.

As the desperado struck the earth the nine men left instinctively wheeled and looked up as though they knew that the startling shot had come from the cliff above.

"Thar he is!" exclaimed several as the figure of a man was seen on the elevated trail outlined against the cloudless morning sky. "Mebbe he's goin' to repeat ther dose."

No: the man on the cliff was seen to lean forward as if utterly fearless of his position, and his two hands moved toward his face.

"I'll always be on hand when you don't want me, men ov Take-Notice!" were the words that came down to the breathless group through the man's hands. "I've marked every devil of ye fer vengeance, an' this mornin's work is only a beginnin'. Ef ye don't recognize me from the Valley ov Death let me inform you that I'm Bill Blake, the man what gave back Cap'n Quartz's thousand last night. One at a time! that's the way I'm goin' to git even with you all fer last summer's work. I never heard ov it till thirty days since, er I would hav found you afore this. Pardon me fer not comin' sooner, but I'll make up fer lost time."

The voice ceased and the man on the cliff straightened again.

He was beyond the reach of the desperadoes' revolvers, and evidently knew it, for his figure stood in full view of all.

All at once Captain Quartz sprung from the group and shook his fist at the enemy overhead.

"We accept the challenge, Bill Blake!" he shouted at the top of his voice. "You lie when you say you ar' goin' ter depopulate Take-Notice. One at a time, eh! that's the blackest lie ever thrown from a villainous tongue. I swear, Cap'n Quartz ov Colorado, an' the boys back me in it, that you've killed yer last man. Do you hear me—yer last man, Bill Blake!"

The avenger evidently caught the purport of Captain Quartz's words if he did not hear them all, for he jerked off his hat and sent down to the bronze men of Take-Notice a ringing cheer of defiance, and then disappeared.

"Let 'im go. We'll find him. Now let's look after Bowie."

Captain Quartz and his followers stepped to where the mountain outlaw lay, his bloodless bowie clutched in his right hand.

A glance told them that the duel so terribly interrupted by Bill Blake's rifle would never be fought out.

The avenger on the cliff had accomplished his purpose, for Bowie Bill was dead, and would fight no more.

"It wasn't his duel an' he had no business to interfere," said Daisy Doll. "I don't know why he should take Bill instead ov me. But I will know when I meet him, an' meet him I will fer that shot!"

CHAPTER VI.

INTERFERED WITH.

"I HAD my choice ov two men an' I took Bowie Bill," remarked the slayer in audible tones as he turned from the spot from which he had stricken the Colorado duelist with death.

It was Bill Blake, a man whose courage we have already seen tested.

There was triumph in his eyes, and he strode from the cliff like a man who had struck one blow for vengeance.

He did not look back to see whether or not he was followed; he did not seem to care.

If Captain Quartz and his pards had ascended

to the elevated trail they would not have found him, for he walked fast and soon was far away.

He carried his rifle with the ease of an old hunter across his shoulder.

It was not the same weapon he had taken to Take-Notice the night before, but an elegant repeater which looked very deadly in the hands of a man who had eyes as keen as his.

The mountain fastnesses swallowed him up, but he kept on.

Bill Blake the avenger had no confidant; no body waited to hear the result of his life-hunt; there was nobody to whom he could relate the tragic death of Bowie Bill.

He did not plunge deeper into the mountains with the air of a man fleeing from a crime; but he seemed to be pushing toward a certain goal which he was anxious to reach.

The sun was far above the eastern horizon when he parted a lot of vines that covered a part of the perpendicular wall of one side of the trail he was traversing, and revealed an opening large enough to admit a man on all-fours.

Entering, he moved forward until he was able to stand erect in midnight gloom.

"Back safe from my first hunt!" he exclaimed, striking a lucifer against a wall at his right. "Oh, you sha'n't escape Bill Blake the avenger, my beauties. I am on yer track till Take-Notice cannot claim one of you fer a habitant. If I had heard ov yer work sooner, death might claim ye all to-day."

He kindled a fire with the match he had struck, and the light leaping up illumined the interior of the cavern, and showed it to be bare of even the roughest furniture.

"I must keep the record," continued Blake moving toward one of the walls with a torch, and when he halted it was before ten names written in black on the whitened wall.

"You drew the prize to-night, Bowie Bill!" he ejaculated, drawing across the name of his victim a piece of keil which produced a dark-red mark. "I will keep on until I have marked every name thus. You shall be the last one, Daisy Doll, though I'd give my rifle if you did not belong to the league ov Take-Notice. You went back after the hangin', they say—went back to save the boy, but you didn't do it, an' you must die with the rest."

The torch showed plainly the names of the Ten Pards which had been traced in large and legible characters on the wall of the cave.

They began with Captain Quartz and ended with Daisy Doll.

Having drawn the death record across Bowie Bill's name, Blake went back to the fire into which he threw the torch again, and threw himself on the ground at the edge of the light.

Any one could have seen that vengeance had brought that man to the wild Colorado hills.

He looked like a hunter whose prey was man, for more than once while his mind was busy before the fire, he would shut his hands hard and his glance would steal toward the rifle that rested in the hollow of his arm.

All at once he sprung up like the dozing panther at the sound a young deer's step.

"Do they want me?" he cried. "Ar' they hyer already? By heavens! I am glad they have come."

Rifle in hand he moved toward the mouth of the cavern where he stopped and listened while he seemed to hold his breath.

"I am hyer to face 'em; why stand back?"

He entered the corridor and moved toward the trail where it ended, but with the vines between him and daylight he stopped again and listened.

Had his practiced ear deceived him after all?

"I'll settle it," he said, parting the creepers, and out he went.

A moment later he involuntarily started back for as he touched the trail there alighted upon it from some bushes overhead a dozen Indian braves, and they stood not more than ten yards away.

For a minute the surprise was mutual and complete.

"White-face no look for red braves," said the foremost of the twelve.

"Thet's a fact. I didn't know you war around, but hyer you ar', an' I'll make the best ov it."

The Indians moved forward, but the rifle that leaped against Blake's shoulder warned them to be cautious.

"Peace or war—which is it?" he said over the barrel. "I'm ready fer either one, so take yer choice."

With one accord the twelve braves elevated their right hands.

"Peace is it, eh?" smiled the avenger, lowering the rifle. "Now, keep yer word like men, fer at the first sign ov treachery I'll open on you with my magazine of death."

A stride carried the red-skins forward, and for a moment they scrutinized Blake from head to foot.

"Him no b'long to the white men in the wooden wigwams," said the leader of the Indians, addressing his followers. "We make peace with him, but the scalps ov the white wolves shall hang from our lodge-poles."

Blake started.

"Beware!" he said. "Don't stake any claims on my ground. You must not touch the men ov Take-Notice. They b'long to me."

The Indians looked amazed.

"Will white-face listen to Dead Eye?" asked the chief.

"Is that yer name? Yes, I'll listen to you. Now, drive ahead."

"White Leaf has left the lodge where she has lived many moons. She has fled from the red warriors who laid the scalps of her enemies at her feet, and whose hands have brought down for her the fawns of the mountains. She has fled to the ten white wolves of this country, and the braves of her adopted people want to take her back."

"Is she white?" asked Blake.

"Her skin is like my brother's."

"Where ar' her parents?"

"They are dead, white-face."

"She was your captive, then?"

"She was a Sioux, if her skin was white."

"I see through the hull thing. She hez given you red foxes the slip, an' you think she is at Take-Notice now."

"She has taken refuge among the strong lodges of the white men. They have protected her, and their scalps shall hang in the lodges of the Sioux. We are on the trail now."

"Remember that I stand between you an' the men ov Take-Notice," said Blake boldly. "I hev no partic'lar objection to your taking ther gal back ef yer kin take her; but when it comes to scalpin' Cap'n Quartz and his Pards, I guess I will say suthin' thar. The gal isn't with them men."

"Aha!" exclaimed Dead Eye. "White-face would keep White Leaf hid from the braves; but he cannot hide her. The red-men are goin' to the wooden lodges. They will carry off the scalps of the ten wolves that live there."

"I say you shall not!" flashed Blake. "But go and get the ten scalps ef you can. Yonder's the trail. But I say hyer that somebody will be hurt before you touch one ov the scalps you want. You have heard me. We might as well part hyer, fer, ef you go on to Take-Notice, by Jove! we'll meet ag'in!"

He stepped aside and with outstretched arm pointed down the trail.

"To your work! I will to mine!" he continued. "Ef the hull Sioux nation enters the game I will play it to ther end just ther same! Move along, I don't want another word with yer. We understand each other well enough. Woe to the man who lifts hatchet er rifle ag'in' the men I hev marked fer killin'!"

The astonished Sioux glared at Blake with eyes filled with mingled rage and astonishment.

His hand continued to point toward the mountain cabins far from the spot, and his look told them that they had "crossed" a man who would prove a relentless foe.

Suddenly Dead Eye waved his braves down the trail, and did not move until the last one had passed him.

"The white-face can talk mad," he suddenly exclaimed whirling upon Blake; "but the Sioux will not turn from the trail they have struck. Whether they find the White Leaf with the pale faces or not, they will strike the wolves and destroy their mountain den. And if he puts out his arm to stop them, they will turn on him and kill."

Blake's eyes seemed coals of fire.

"Leave me an' do yer worst!" he cried, throwing his rifle against his shoulder and covering the defiant red-skin. "Take yer red snakes to the trail. The sooner I prove my words, the worse it will be fer the muster-roll ov Sittin' Bull's red army. Go! er by my life! I'll bullet-bore yer infernal head!"

For another moment Dead Eye glared at the avenger, and then turned to his braves.

"To the trail," Blake heard him say. "The captive shall be found, and the white men shall die when their cabins burn!"

The eyes of the avenger followed the Indian braves.

"Thet's what I call a new deal," he said.

"It's hard to tell who holds the best hand now; but I'll know between this an' mornin'!"

He went back into the cave, but soon reappeared in front of the opening.

The Indian band had passed out of sight, and after gazing in the direction taken by it for a minute he sprung away with his rifle at a trail.

On, on he went.

The trail winding in and out among the mountains led him in devious ways, but he stuck to it with the pertinacity of the bloodhound that always wins in the end.

He did not stop until he reached the summit of a cliff from which he had a beautiful view of the country underneath.

Far away he saw what appeared a little collection of huts or wigwams.

"Yonder's the place!" he exclaimed aloud. "We'll soon see who holds the best hand!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE BOOTLESS INVASION.

"DON'T I wish he would come back hyer like he did last night?" remarked Captain Quartz while he stood in front of his cabin in Take-Notice and looked defiantly toward the mountains that hemmed in the Valley of Death. "It's gettin' night ag'in, an' ef he comes at all it will be under its cover. He said we should die one by one till thar warn't a soul ov us left; but it's a lie ez black ez his own heart!"

The leader of the Pards of Take-Notice had scarcely ceased when something dropped at his feet.

It might have fallen from the sky, for nobody was in sight, and despite the shades of night which were gathering, he saw that an Indian arrow was sticking in the ground before him and that a piece of paper adhered to the feathered end.

"A warnin' from somewhar," ejaculated the captain, as he stooped to secure the mysterious document.

The next moment he held it in his hand.

"Ef I could read writin' I'd make the thing out myself, but Daisy Doll's the scholar ov the camp, an' he'll hev to perform thet service."

Captain Quartz had unfolded the arrow's message and seen that it contained a few hastily traced words, then he turned and walked rapidly toward Daisy Doll's cabin.

"Read thet," he said, handing arrow and message to the man whom he encountered beyond the threshold. "Thet's thet way it came to Take-Notice a minute ago—on thet arrow."

Mystified, but eager to read the message, Daisy Doll took the proffered shaft and leaned toward the rude lamp that lighted up the cabin from the rude pine table.

"Read it aloud, Daisy. Comin' ez it did, it consarns all ov us. Thar's no secrets on thet paper."

Daisy Doll's eyes seemed to snap as he mastered the contents of the paper.

Then he read:

"MEN OF TAKE-NOTICE:—

"A dozen Sioux braves will visit you to-night. Be prepared. They mean bizness."

"Is it signed?" asked Captain Quartz, when Daisy Doll paused.

"Nary a name."

"It stumps me," was the reply. "Injuns comin' to Take-Notice? We never had a quarrel with a red since we came hyer. Do you b'lieve thet story, Daisy?"

"I believe it. We might as well get ready."

"To-night, is it? Wal, let 'em come! I'll rouse the boys." And a moment later the young giant was alone.

"I know who sends this message," he said.

"It's a way he's taken ter git the drop on all ov us an' not miss one. By Jovel Bill Blake, you must have taken a big oath at one time. I'd sooner see you hyer than the red-skins, fer I want ter settle with you fer thet shot from the cliff, even ef it did kill Bowie Bill, my foe. Come instead ov the dozen Sioux, an' I'll fight you hand to hand, er any way you want."

Captain Quartz kept his word. He roused the men of the mountain camp and weapons were made ready for the expected visit.

The shadows deepened and night came at last.

To all appearances Take-Notice was entirely deserted, but its denizens were on their guard.

"Mebbe the feller what sent the message will come with the reds," muttered Captain Quartz. "I wish he would. Daisy Doll is right, that man is Bill Blake, an' he would save us fer himself. Wal, he'll find himself the worst fooled—"

The worthy captain paused for one of the men who were his companions in the shanty said he believed somebody was coming.

"Injuns, think you, Pawnee?" whispered the captain.

"Mebbe so."

It was an anxious moment for the inhabitants of Take-Notice, but all at once several dark figures were seen advancing in a stooping posture like the wily savages of the wild West.

"Count 'em," said Captain Quartz in low tones.

Several men did so, for, aided by the brilliant starlight that fell upon the town the desperadoes could see the crawling figures of their foes.

"Ready, boys. No shootin' till I give the word. We'll find out first what brought the red skunks hyer. Let each man cover his foe. Come!"

Captain Quartz stepped across the threshold with eight men at his heels.

"Hands up!" he shouted sternly as twelve figures sprung erect. "We've got the dead drop on ye, reds, so offer to fight ef you dare!"

Taken by surprise, the Indians were dumfounded.

"Warn't lookin' fer us just yet, eh?" laughed Captain Quartz. "We got a message from the clouds that ye war comin'. Ef we hadn't, blamed ef we wouldn't hev been the softest snaps you ever struck. Whar's yer chief?"

"Dead Eye is here!" exclaimed a red-skin advancing a stride despite the menacing revolvers of the nine. "Where is the White Leaf who belongs to the Sioux nation?"

"The what? I don't get a fair grip on what you say," said Captain Quartz. "The hull population ov Take-Notice stand before you. Thar war another this mornin' but he's over ther hill to night. State yer bizness."

"Dead Eye and his braves want the white girl who has left her lodge."

"Ohol the gal, eh?—the same one that hed the drop on me this mornin', I expect. Wal, she ain't hyer an' ef she war, Dead Eye, it's a question whether you would git her."

The eyes of the Sioux seemed to flash.

"Dead Eye an' his braves will search the white men's camp," he said. "The White Leaf must go back to her people."

"You will s'arch Take-Notice, will you?" hissed Captain Quartz. "The city h'z never been s'arched, an' it never shall be! Take yer man, boys—fire!"

Nine revolvers seemed to speak at once, and nine Indians reeled from the deadly flashes.

"S'arch Take-Notice, will yer?" repeated Captain Quartz. "Thar doesn't live the red-skin thet'll ever do thet. You three red skunks go back to yer tribe an' tell Sittin' Bull that it's mighty onhealthy in this locality. Go!"

The three Sioux spared by the pistols of the mountain roughs stood like men dazed by some awful calamity; they had not moved since the death of their comrades, neither had they lifted a hand.

"We'll plant Dead Eye an' his braves er leave 'em to the buzzards, just ez we like," continued the captain. "You may find the runaway gal somewhar; but she's not hyer. Sneak around an hour an' we'll kill yer on sight. Thar men ov Take-Notice ar' pisen when they're stirred up. Boys, I give these skunks one minute to vamose ther ranch. At the end ov thet time pour it into 'em!"

The three Sioux saw themselves covered by the revolvers of the men by whom they were confronted.

There were merciless fingers at the triggers—fingers that itched to repeat the death doses already administered.

With one accord the warriors turned.

"Thet's sensible; now make yerselves scarce," said Captain Quartz. "By the Eternal! you go away by the grace ov the men ov Take-Notice."

Did the three Sioux throw vengeful glances upon the nine bodies that lay at their feet?

If fire flashed in the depths of their eyes, Captain Quartz and his companions saw it not; they only saw the red-skinned trio that turned away.

Without a word or a gesture the three Indians walked to one end of the mountain town.

There they stopped and wheeled as if by preconcerted signal, and joined hands above their heads.

"The pale-faces have killed the braves of the Sioux nation," said one. "They have driven Little Fox, Crow Foot and Deep Thunder away that they might avenge Dead Eye and his warriors. We will not go back to Sitting Bull's

camp, but we will stay here till we have paid the white killers back."

Not another word was spoken, and as the brave ceased all three walked away.

"So they left three, did they?" said a voice at the side of the trail, while a pair of glistening eyes watched the moving figures. "I thought they'd flash the hull twelve; but no matter. You three reds will never accomplish anything. The men of Take-Notice belong to me, I tell you!"

The figures of the Sioux had disappeared by this time, and the last speaker was alone in the trail.

Need we inform the reader that it was Bill Blake, the avenger?

He had accomplished his purpose—he had saved the men of Take-Notice from an Indian surprise, in order that he might carry out his own oath of vengeance.

"I guess the bes' hand still belongs to me," he murmured, triumphantly; but a time was at hand when he would not appear so sanguine.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MATCH IN TAKE-NOTICE.

DAISY DOLL was one of the inhabitants of Take-Notice who believed that the message carried by the arrow had come from Bill Blake's hands.

"What's the use ov waitin' hyer till he takes a notion to come?" the young giant asked himself. "Since he has sworn to kill all ov us, one by one, I want to be the first man to meet him to prove him a liar. If the young chap gets well what the girl rescued in Death Valley, we will hev another enemy to contend with; but Bill Blake is the worst ov the two. I'm goin' to find him—that's what I'm goin' ter do."

Daisy Doll, who had gone to his cabin after the death of the nine Indians, emerged into the calm starlight as the last word fell from his lips.

He was armed with a repeating-rifle beside the revolvers, which he carried where he could lay his hands on them in an instant, and there was a gleam of vengeance in his eyes.

He started immediately toward one end of the mountain turn.

"I'm not goin' ter set foot in Take-Notice ag'in till I've met an' settled with that vengeance-hunter," he said. "I never knowed that Ned Blake had a brother, but it seems thar war two ov 'em, an' we didn't hang the whole family when we pulled the young card sharp up."

Daisy Doll was leaving the huts behind when a hasty footstep struck his ear, and he halted and turned in the direction from which he had come.

The next moment two men stood face to face.

"Which way, Daisy?" asked the person who came up.

"Thet's hard to tell, cap'n," was the reply.

"I'm goin' ter hunt a man."

"Bill Blake?" queried Captain Quartz.

"No one else."

"Goin' alone, eh?"

"Yes—alone."

The leader of the Pards of Take-Notice did not speak for a moment.

"It's rather risky seein' how thet cuss kin shoot," he said at length.

"I take ther risk, cap'n, not you," was the resentful retort. "Ef I wasn't ov age I'd hev asked leave ter quit camp; but I guess Daisy Doll's his own master."

Under his mustache Captain Quartz bit his lip.

"I hope you'll find him—I do indeed," he said. "From what I know ov him already he'll not hide ef he knows you want him. I only stopped you to say thet we're all goin' ter hunt him ez a league."

"I don't object ter thet, but while ye'r huntin' Bill, mind ye that you don't find ther other one."

Captain Quartz started.

"Do you mean the chap you sent over ther cliff ter be saved by the gal them red-skins wanted?"

"Mebbe I do; but you will find out afore long."

"Thet's yer secret, then, ther one you wouldn't tell us when we found you in the valley."

Daisy Doll was silent.

"Keep it—we don't want it," shot Captain Quartz through clinched teeth. "Go an' find Bill Blake. We'll hunt 'im, too."

"An' leave Take-Notice unguarded?"

"Ef we want ter."

Daisy Doll stepped back.

"Do as you please," he said, and the next

moment Captain Quartz stood alone on the spot gazing after the man whose figure was fast disappearing.

Suddenly he too whirled on his heel and walked in the opposite direction.

"Wal, Daisy's gone—off on a trail ov his own arter Bill Blake," he said, halting before a group of his followers. "He said that we had better look out lest we run ag'in' the feller he pushed from the cliff. I'm freezin' to run ag'in' somebody—I don't care who it is. Ef thar war a thousand Bill Blakes in thar kentry I wouldn't stay in Take Notice another hour. We're goin' ter find 'im—Daisy sha'n't! I've got my dander up, an' I swar that we will settle with the devil what shot Bowie Bill."

Need we say that Captain Quartz's words found quick responses in the hearts of the men he addressed?

It was evident from the feeling displayed that they were more friendly to Bowie Bill than to Daisy Doll, who had further estranged himself by his refusal to disclose what he termed a secret about the young person saved by the Sioux captive from the pistols of the Pards in Death Valley.

"Come!" cried Captain Quartz. "Thersooner we find him the better. You kin write, Silver Fist, ef you ain't exactly a school-teacher. Put up a notice on the door ov my shanty to the effect that we ain't at home. Say what you please on it. We don't come back hyer till we've settled with all our foes."

Ten minutes later a brouzed man more than six feet tall affix'd to the thick door of one of the shanties a dirty piece of paper on which, in rude characters, were the words:

"NOT AT HOME.

"Woe to the hand that touches anything hyer."

"Thet'll do," said Captain Quartz; "now let's be off, er Daisy Doll may get ther start ov us."

Take-Notice was forthwith deserted, but half an hour later it had a tenant.

The visitor came from the west, and glided down the one street of the mountain-town to halt before the paper nailed to the door, which was barely visible in the starlight.

"They left that for somebody to read," said a girlish voice. "I'll just see what it means."

A match flashed in the speaker's face a moment later, and while it revealed Silver Fist's uncouth chirography, it also showed the features of White Leaf, the late girl-captive of the Sioux.

She read the notice, despite the numerous scrawls that composed it.

"Off on a blood-hunt!" she exclaimed. "I know it just as well as if you had said so on this paper, Captain Quartz. Woe to the hand that touches anything here, eh? I will first see what you've left behind."

White Leaf turned away to halt suddenly a short time afterward, and to start back with a wild exclamation.

"My God! what does this mean?" she cried, and again a match was pressed into service.

Holding her breath, she moved the little flame over the half-naked figures that lay on the ground at her feet.

"Dead Eye and eight of his braves," she said. "I know what brought them into this part of the country. They wanted me—their captive. I thank thee, Heaven, that their trail ended here, and not elsewhere. I will not go back to Sitting Bull's camp alive, even though I have been contented there. I am free now, and I have something worth living for. You led your braves into a den of tigers, Dead Eye. The Pards of Take-Notice kill when they shoot. They don't stand on ceremony. Ah! if my friend were here, what would he say?"

The match flickered and went out, and the girl arose.

"I will let the dead guard the tigers' den," she continued, "till the beasts come back. They hunt for one I trust they will not find; but if they find him—"

She paused and finished the sentence with an ejaculation of surprise, for a figure had leaped upon her with the agility of a mountain panther, and she was in the arms of an Indian brave.

"White Leaf found at last," was hissed in her ears in triumphant tones. "She made her trail lead to Dead Eye and his braves, but Little Fox's ears heard her step an' him an' his brothers creep after her. We are here, White Leaf—Deep Thunder, Crow Foot and Little Fox. The white wolves spared them that they might recover the captive of the tribe, an' pay 'em for killing Dead Eye an' his warriors."

The girl captive seemed speechless.

She was in the power of three Indians whose names had just been spoken by her main captor.

She knew them well.

Many a time had she witnessed their daring feats in the land of the Sioux, and in Sitting Bull's camp.

She knew that she was the object of their visit to the Colorado country, that she was to be dragged back to the tribe whose captive she had been for years.

Her eyes flashed defiantly while her captor spoke, and she seemed to see all the hardships that another captivity would impose upon her.

"The trail was long, White Leaf, but Little Fox an' his brothers live to find it," continued the Indian. "Dead Eye an' his braves will never look upon White Leaf again. We will stay here till we pay the white wolves for their shots. White Leaf got another light?"

Before the girl could reply, a red hand dived into the pocket of her fantastic hunting-frock and produced her only remaining match.

"It will burn the wolf's den!" he exclaimed with fiendish glee. "Deep Thunder will make the fire."

Away bounded the red incendiary, leaving the girl in the hands of the remaining Indians.

"I must escape," passed rapidly through her mind. "Never will I go back to the tribe alive."

All at once she started back, and to her joy wrenched herself from Little Fox's grip.

"Free! You forgot to disarm me, red-skin!" she exclaimed.

The two Indians sprung after her with exclamations of rage on their lips, but were instantly confronted by a revolver which White Leaf had jerked from beneath her frock.

"Girl no shoot!" cried Little Fox.

"Liar!" was the response.

The girl could not see the figures of her foes with any degree of distinctness, but they were near enough to give her a general aim.

Raising the weapon on the nearest one she pressed the trigger, and at the flash Little Fox threw up his hands and staggered back.

"You, too, Crow Foot!" she cried, drawing on the other, who dropped at the second shot across Dead Eye and his braves.

Lowering the revolver almost before Crow Foot struck, the young girl turned away.

She knew that the shots had roused Deep Thunder, and she expected to see him rush upon her; but she resolved to avoid any further encounter by flight.

Gripping the weapon hard, the Sioux captive turned and ran for life.

She did not glance over her shoulder to see whether she was pursued, but kept on until Take-Notice was far in her rear.

When she did stop and look back she saw a sharp flame that grew larger while she gazed, and all at once there came to her ears a yell so fiendish and clear that she involuntarily started.

Deep Thunder had not allowed the death of his comrades to interfere with his designs, for with the one match he had inaugurated the destruction of Take-Notice!

The fire had a strange fascination for the girl, and she was looking at it oblivious to everything else, when a human hand fell upon her shoulder from behind and she turned with a startled cry.

"Did you do that?" asked a voice, at that instant. "Did you go so far as to burn the homes of my foes?"

CHAPTER IX.

THE CARD SHARP'S "GHOST."

"I did not do it," said White Leaf, looking into the flashing eyes of the speaker, a fine-looking youth of eighteen or thereabouts. "Those huts were fired by an Indian from whose companions I had just escaped."

"An Indian, eh?"

"Yes—a Sioux. They are looking for me. They want to take me back to the old camp, but," fiercely, "they shall never do that!"

The youth was silent for a minute, during which time he watched the flames that were fast devouring the shanties of Take-Notice.

"Do you think I could find the red burner?" he suddenly asked.

"I think not. He must be gone by this time," answered White Leaf. "Out of twelve braves who came from the North to find me he is the only one left."

"Where are the others?"

"The men of Take-Notice slew nine to-night, and I was compelled to shoot two in order to escape."

"You will shoot, then?" smiled the youth, admiringly.

"When I am cornered, may be."

"By heavens! I wish I had my revolver at the head of that Indian when he was striking the match," hissed the youngster. "I am the person who is to take vengeance on Captain Quartz and his pards. They belong to me and to no one else. I have told you what they did to me last summer. Haven't I a right to pay them back with the interest of blood?"

"I don't know but that you have, but—" said the youth.

"You would say that because they did not accomplish their purpose. I should not be so hard on them! Curse them! they meant to do it all the same. Last night I lassoed the only one among the lot for whom I should entertain any mercy; but he got the better of me at the outcome. It was a narrow escape. I shudder when I think how I might have fallen from the cliff into the Valley of Death. The tree that broke my fall helped him I suppose. Then, if you had not come with daylight I would have fallen into the hands of Quartz and his devils. What a surprise there would have been! Girl—White Leaf—if you do not want me to shed blood, you should have left me in the valley. Vengeance has marked the path which I tread. Already the mountain league has been broken. One of the ten has been killed—I wish I knew by whom! Look how the old place beams! If the men of Take-Notice see the light won't they turn back?"

"They must see it."

"Then we go forward to wait for them!" exclaimed the youth. "You cannot keep me back, White Leaf. I am Ned Blake, and I cannot forget what those men did last summer."

He broke from the hard that had been laid restrainingly on his arm, and the next moment he was flying toward the burning cabins.

White Leaf the late captive did not hesitate, but sprung after him at the top of her speed.

She managed to keep him in sight, although he got rapidly over the ground and when near the blazing huts he halted and sought the shade of a rock.

"Now, let them come!" he exclaimed.

"What have you followed me, girl?"

"I am here," said White Leaf resolutely.

"You cannot drive me back."

"I do not want to although you must not interfere with my work. I've had a rope around my neck, and the men whose blood I want swung me off between sky and sed. That is why I am here. That is why Ned Blake is the deadly foe of the mountain Pards!"

Turning from the girl, the youth looked toward the huts which were burning down.

The leaping flames blotted out the stars, as it were, and darkened the sky overhead while they threw a lurid light around the thrilling scene.

White Leaf watched the young avenger.

She saw how eagerly he waited for the coming of the men he wanted, how tightly he clutched the repeating rifle already at full cock, and how his eyes blazed as he watched.

All at once there sprung into view the figure of a man who looked monstrously large in the glowing light.

White Leaf could not suppress a cry.

"Captain Quartz!" dropped from her lips.

"My God! he has come back!"

"Hush!" whispered the youth. "I see him. Ah! I will pay him back for last summer's work. He is not alone. See! they are all with him but the one killed by some one."

It was true that Captain Quartz who had suddenly reappeared was not alone.

He was backed by eight or nine men clad like himself, and armed to the teeth.

The Indian's work had brought the party back to Take-Notice; it had turned them back on the trail, but they had arrived too late to pay Deep Thunder for his deed.

They were not more than fifty yards from the young couple sheltered by the rock.

"Gods! what a target!" White Leaf heard the youth say as though totally unaware of her presence. "I could send a bullet through his head and settle the old debt. They're the same bounds that gave me aces instead of kings. Here they come! If they had in their power the man that fired the camp, he wouldn't fare very well."

Captain Quartz led his maddened men straight toward the rock that hid the youthful pair.

Not an eye saw the rifle that covered them, nor the gleaming eyes that looked down the barrel at their breasts.

The cabins continued to burn on the desperadoes' right.

"Halt!" thundered Captain Quartz. "Wal,

boys, we're back afore we thought ov comin'. What do ye think ov Take Notice now? Isn't worth a cuss, eh? Whar's the man what did it? He's the meanest coward what ever struck a match! I am hyer to brand him the dirtiest skunk in Colorado—meaner than the miner that would steal his brother's dust. Show yerself of ye dare!" The captain elevated his voice. "I'm sp'ilin' ter meet yer. Ther boys shall stan' back an' give ye fair play. You shall fight nobody but Cap'n Quartz, an' in any manner ye like! Come on, er be ther coward that ye ar'!"

The giant outlaw ceased and looked defiantly on every side.

The crackling flames seemed to mock his challenge, and the mountain winds threw back the echo of his words.

"Just ez I expected, pards," he said after a minute's silence. "The mountains hide the coward? Will nobody accept my challenge? I want to fight somebody—I don't care who! I'll cross knives with the devil if he isn't afraid to meet Captain Quartz."

At that moment the youth, closely watched all the time by White Leaf, dropped his rifle and stepped forward with close-shut lips.

"Don't face those men wild-cats," said the girl, clutching at his arm.

"I will—I'm here for that!" was the reply, as he shook loose from her hand.

The next instant he was beyond the rock, and in another he had passed into the vivid glare of the flames.

"I am here, men of Take-Notice!" he said in clear tones.

For a moment the mountain Pards did not seem to see him, and when they did they gazed as if they did not see him aright.

"My God! the card sharp's ghost!" rung suddenly from Captain Quartz's lips, as he started back with frightened countenance. "Look at it, pards! By my soul, Take-Notice has been destroyed by the dead!"

The words fell in startling accents from the outlaw's tongue.

He had retreated to his men who were staring over his outstretched arm at the figure that had so suddenly presented itself.

The youth continued to advance with his flashing eyes fastened upon the startled denizens of the mountain lair.

His rifle rested carelessly as it were in the hollow of his left arm, as if he relied on his presence accomplishing one-half of the work he had in view.

Captain Quartz, giant though he was, was the very picture of fright.

His bronzed face was now almost deathly white, and his eyes seemed ready to leap from beneath their long, black lashes.

"It's a ghost, not flesh an' blood, boys. We hanged thet boy last summer because he held ther winnin' hand," gasped Captain Quartz. "No use ter fight sech a thing ez that. I'd sooner fight ther devil. Stop it! You can't. It kin hev Take-Notice fer all I care!"

The speaker was on the eve of breaking away and fleeing terrified from the scene; and it would be safe to say that he would have been followed by the men at his back.

"Ghost or not, you belong to me!" suddenly cried the youth. "You have not forgotten last summer's work—neither have I. I am here for revenge. I have doomed you all with an oath recorded beyond the stars!"

With the last word the rifle left the hollow of the speaker's arm, and instantly covered the leader of the mountain Pards.

"I begin the work of vengeance in the light of your mounta'n den!" continued the youth sternly. "Captain Quartz, I commence with you!"

The cheek of the speaker touched the stock of his leveled weapon, and his finger was pressing the trigger when the sharp crack of a rifle some distance away changed the thrilling scene, and the youth fell back with a cry of mingled surprise and pain.

"The Pards ov Take-Notice belong to me!" cried a loud voice, and quickly followed two shots which sent two men staggering back from Captain Quartz's side. "I am the man to pay them for last summer's work."

A strange cry pealed from White Leaf's throat.

"Merciful Heaven! there are two avngers on the same trail to-night!" she cried.

As for the youth, he wheeled in the direction from which the three swift shots had come, and sent a mad look after the slayer.

"These men are mine—mine!" he exclaimed. "You have no right to an ounce of their blood! I will brook no interference in my mountain

heart-hunt. You have already killed men who belonged to me. Stand where you are or meet me half-way! I will settle with you before I touch a man of Take-Notice camp."

White Leaf saw the enraged speaker turn toward her, but his eyes did not see her at all.

"You broke my arm to save Captain Quartz for yourself," continued Ned Blake, addressing the unseen. "I am a match for you yet. I will pay you for your interference; then I will settle with the men you have left."

He reached the girl's side and she caught his arm, but he madly broke away.

"The interferer first, girl!" he boarsely hissed. "Then the mountain Pards!"

The next moment he was gone.

CHAPTER X.

SPOILING SOME PLANS.

WHITE LEAF, the Sioux captive, gazed after the youth in a dazed manner until he disappeared.

When she turned to regard the roughs of Take-Notice she saw that they were recovering from the consternation caused by the thrilling scenes of the last few moments.

Color was coming back to Captain Quartz's face, and the old flashes of madness lit up his eyes once more.

The two Pards felled by the deadly rifle-shots lay motionless on the ground.

Between the eyes of each was a dark-red spot, telling that they had gone to join Bowie Bill, the Pard shot on the eve of the duel in Death Valley.

"Forward, Pards!" suddenly cried Captain Quartz's voice. "The skunk what shot the boys shall pay fer his trigger-play."

The speaker sprung toward the white girl before he ceased to speak.

Ready to follow him to death, the dark-faced avngers were at his heels.

White Leaf turned to fly.

"Halt thar, girl!" cried Captain Quartz, catching sight of her at that moment.

"To be insulted by you—never!" said White Leaf, as she kept on.

Once more the summons was repeated; this time in sterner tones than before, but it only served to quicken the girl's steps.

"I'll stop her!" grated the captain.

A moment later the report of a revolver cut the air, and a mad cry of exultation broke over the Pard's lips as the girl threw up her hands and reeled from the mountain trail.

A few bounds brought Captain Quartz to the spot.

"Jes' ez I thought—the girl that got the dead-drop on me in the valley," he said, looking up into the faces of his rough comrades, who were regarding the beautiful victim of the revolver. "She ain't dead, pards, but it's no fault ov Cap'n Quartz, fer I shot ter kill. Look! isn't she a daisy? She's the captive Dead Eye an' his red Greasers war lookin' fer when they came to Take Notice. By Jove! what do you say to drawin' cut's fer her if she rekivers?"

"We'll draw er fight fer her, cap'n," was the reply, followed by a coarse laugh. "But ar' we goin' ter stop hyer? The ghost an' the man what dropped Trump Card and Dead Drop ar' at large."

"Thet's a fact," said Captain Quartz. "They have got ter be looked arter, an' so hez this mountsin daisy. I'll stay by her, boys. Go on an' hunt the others."

The mountain Pards hesitated and exchanged significant glances.

Had White Leaf's wild beauty already captured the heart of Captain Quartz?

"I'll pay fair, boys," he said a moment later. "Avenge the dead Pards to-night ef you kin; then we'll play fer the girl."

"Wbar will you be, cap'n?"

"Nigh hyer."

The men started off, but not in the best of spirits.

They seemed to believe that the man who had been their leader so long had found his fate in the eyes that had first opened to stare at his unhandsome face.

Still, that should not destroy their desire for revenge.

The mountain vendetta had to be fought out.

When Captain Quartz found himself alone with the girl who had been brought down by his revolver, he bore her back toward the fire that was still at work on the mountain buts, and for the first time saw how narrow her escape had been.

The ball had cut away a lock of her dark hair and plowed a slight furrow along her head, pro-

ducing, fortunately, nothing more than unconsciousness.

"I'm glad ther Injuns didn't git you—hang me ef I ain't!" began the captain. "You're too purty to go back ter Sitting Bull's camp whar I've heard you hev been. What's yer name?"

"White Leaf."

"I mean what's yer civilized name?" persisted Captain Quartz.

"I think I never had one," was the answer. "I have been called White Leaf so long that I can recall no other name."

"It's a purty handle, but it's Injun, an' I hate everything red," almost hissed the mountain Pard. "You see what somebody did to-night!" and the bronzed hand of the rough was waved toward the ruins of Take Notice. "Thet somebody, whoever he is, will hev to pay fer this work."

"Then you will have to revenge yourself on an Indian."

Captain Quartz started.

"I thought Bill Blake did it," he said; "but ef it war a red-skin's work, I kin guess whose. Thet's what we get fer sparin' three out ov twelve!" the speaker ground through his teeth. "They didn't go far, then; they came back an' fired Take-Notice, curse their ornery pictures! Did you see 'em do it?"

"Not exactly. It was Deep Thunder's work."

"You know 'im then?"

"I ought to," and White Leaf smiled. "Twenty times he has laid scalps at my feet."

"Which he'll never do agin!" flashed the captain. "Look hyer, girl. You've fallen into white hands at last—into hands that will cut an' slash fer ye ef necessary all over Colorado. Thar wer' ten ov us awhile back, but thar ar' seven now, ef Daisy Doll hezn't been wiped out. How did you come to run across ther ghost that hed ther drop on me to-night when Bill Blake checked 'im?"

"The ghost?" echoed White Leaf. "That boy was flesh and blood."

"Ov course. I didn't think so at first, but I know it now. He's the young card-sharp we pulled up last summer fer amusement."

"Yes, the same person," said the girl.

"An' he wants vengeance?"

"That is why he is here."

"I thought so. He hez taken an oath ter exterminate ther Pards ov Take-Notice!"

"Yes."

"He's makin' mighty poor headway," and Captain Quartz showed his teeth in a grin. "The other chap's doin' the deadliest work. What made him take his oath?—do you know?"

"Yes. He believes his brother dead. Remember that they have not met since you hanged the one."

"Oho! I see now!" exclaimed Captain Quartz, and he thought for a moment. "I wonder who cut the youngster down?"

White Leaf did not speak, although her look told that she could answer the question.

"Did you hear me?" said the mountain Pard suddenly catching her eye. "I'd like to know who cut ther boy down arter the job an' helped to set him on ther track ov vengeance. I b'lieve you know, gal."

White Leaf could not avoid the captain's look.

"I do know," she said; "that is, I know what he told me."

"Wal, that's the truth. Now who was he?"

"One of your men—Daisy Doll."

Captain Quartz did not start nor manifest any surprise.

"I recollect that we missed Daisy shortly arter the hangin'," he said, "and when he rejoined us he said he had been back to see that the card sharp war rightly hung. He wouldn't shoot Daisy, then?"

"He will not spare one of you," was the reply.

"He's got blamed little gratitude then—that's all."

"He lassoed Daisy Doll last night, and they both went over the cliff and alighted in Death Valley. Does that look like sparing the man that cut him down?"

"Not much. It's a queer but for ther two brothers," said Captain Quartz, not more than half aloud. "They're bound to meet soon ef ther boys don't make meetin' impossible with their six shooters. They'll pool their issues then, I s'pose, and unite their trails. Betwixt the two, thar's likely to be some hot work in these diggin's. One hunts us because we didn't hang him, an' the other because he thinks we got in our work. Curse you a thousand times, Daisy Doll! Ef I had been sure of what you did

thet day, thar'd be a skeleton somewhar among ther mountains, an' not a walkin' giant ov flesh an' blood! Girl, is thet young chap anything to you?"

A deep flush stole over White Leaf's face.

It made Captain Quartz grind his teeth.

"Don't answer my question—I know," he said. "You belong to the Pards ov Take-Notice from now on, an' I may say thet Cap'n Quartz already thinks more ov your eyes than ov anything else on earth."

White Leaf instinctively shrank away, but the hand of the outlaw grew tighter on her arm.

"The best hand ov trumps ever held in Colorado b'longs to me to-night," he continued, in unmistakable tones of triumph. "I needn't stay hyer an' let the Blake boys get in their work on this carkiss. Thar ar' other places fer Cap'n Quartz besides Colorado. The six Pards kin take care ov themselves. You need a p-recter, White Leaf."

"I am able to take care of myself," was the speedy retort. "I have been the Indian's captive; I do not want to be a white man's."

Despite Captain Quartz's grip, the girl tore herself loose as the last sentence rung from her lips.

She was ten feet away before the head Pard of Take-Notice seemed to realize his loss.

"Not so fast, my daisy," he said, darting after her. "You forget that I am Cap'n Quartz, the boss devil ov Colorado, who never lost a game! Halt, thar! You are not free yet. Ah! I have you again, my beauty! This is my night, not yours."

White Leaf found herself in the power of the outlaw again.

His eyes fairly blazed with triumph.

"I'm not bound to the boys," he said; "I kin cut loose from them at any time—an' I'll do it this night. We'll never play fer yer eyes. I'll rake in the stake myself afore a card is thrown. I'll make you Mrs. Cap'n Quartz, an' queen ov a camp a thousand miles from this."

"Thet's a lie, cap'n!"

The stern voice that spoke these words was followed by the dropping of a heavy hand upon Captain Quartz's shoulder, and the next instant he was whirled half-way around and almost separated from his prisoner.

"Daisy Doll!" he exclaimed, glaring at the giant who had interfered with his plans. "Curse you! I know all. You cut the card sharp down, arter the hangin' last summer; you—"

"I did!" was the interruption. "But it didn't make him my friend. Cap'n, let that girl go. I give you five seconds—no more!"

The leader of the mountain Pards found the muzzle of a cocked revolver almost in his face, and behind it were the tigerish eyes of the young giant.

"Loosen yer grip, I say!" continued Daisy Doll. "Pard though you ar' I'll kill you ef you don't."

CHAPTER XI.

CLEARING HIS WAY.

Let us go back a little while and follow the young avenger, White Leaf's young companion, in his hunt for the man who had prevented him from taking the life of Captain Quartz, and perhaps the lives of several of his comrades.

Little did he dream that the person who had baffled him was his brother.

He did not care for the wound which he now knew had been inflicted on the fleshy part of his arm, and had not fortunately broken any bones.

"I will not be interfered with," fell madly from his lips. "The vengeance of no man shall baffle me. The men who threw a noose over my head belong to me, and to me alone!"

He soon reached the mountain trail, and knew that he must be near the spot from whence the three shots had proceeded, but the figure of the slayer was not to be seen.

The youth halted perplexed in the trail.

"Is he going to escape me?" he exclaimed. "He has killed three of the Ten. Are the others to fall by his rifle? Heaven! I hope not. Show me his trail, justice! Guide me to him. I will settle with him forever. I will be the sole avenger, or I will die at his feet."

To these words there was no response.

The rough country that surrounded him threw back the echoes and instead of calming his spirits only increased his ire.

He did not think how futile might be an attempt to find a man among the mountains in the uncertain light of the stars; but he seemed to feel that justice and vengeance must surely bring them together.

Take-Notice and his foes were behind him—why not go back and take the lives he sought? Suddenly he started forward again.

"I will find the man who is baffling me!" he cried. "While he lives to press a trigger I cannot hope to end the feud the Ten Pards began."

Half an hour later he was far from the mountain town.

His rage had carried him thus far without one cooling thought.

He leaned against a tree at the edge of the trail, and let the winds cool his forehead.

"Heavens! I left the girl behind," he suddenly exclaimed. "What a fool I have been. I owe her my life, and yet I abandoned her to the mercy of the fiends whose blood I want. Hadn't I better go back and rescue her? Ned Blake, you've played the fool to-night, and played it well, too."

He left the tree, and started down the trail toward the ruins of the mountain camp.

"I'm followed!" he said to himself, halting before he had gone twenty paces. "Can it be that 'be very man I want to meet is on my track? I hope he is." And he turned with ready rifle and looked in the direction from which certain sounds came.

The eyes of the young avenger fairly glowed as he waited for the person still unseen.

He was being approached by a cat-like tread, which now and then broke a twig that lay on the trail.

The seconds seemed minutes to Ned Blake.

Slowly at last there appeared the figure of a human being on the trail, and the youth's rifle went to his shoulder.

"The man I want!" he said. "I will pay him for interfering with Ned Blake's revenge."

The next moment the boy's "halt!" rung sternly out, and the figure stopped as if a hand had dropped upon its shoulder.

"Up with your hands! I've got the drop on you," continued the youth. "I allow no man to interfere with my affairs, and you have done so. The men of Take-Notice belong to me. I want the world to understand this. You have shot three of them already, and you want the other seven. What do you mean? Why do you want the blood of the white wolves of the mountain lair? Answer me before I drive a bullet through your head!"

A moment's silence followed the boy's last words.

"Who talks to Deep Thunder?" said a voice. "He is the only Sioux left out of the twelve that came from Sitting Bull's camp to find the white captive."

"An Indian!" exclaimed Ned Blake, in tones of disappointment. "I cannot believe that the killer is a red-skin. I have stopped the wrong person."

He went forward a step, and then he saw the naked outlines of the person he had halted.

A young Indian stood before him.

"Deep Thunder has not touched the white wolves, but he gave their strong wigwams to the fire," said the Sioux. "His hand is against them, though, for Dead Eye and his braves fell when their pistols flashed. Who talks to Deep Thunder?"

"The man who hates Captain Quartz more than any other man on earth!" was the reply. "You fired the shanties, but you did not slay? Who did?"

"Deep Thunder knows."

"You do?" and the youth sprung to the Indian's side. "Tell me where he is."

"Deep Thunder struck his trail a while ago, an' followed him to tell him how glad he was that he had killed the white-faces. His face is white, too—"

"I know that."

"His eye is as keen as an eagle's, an' when his hand touches the trigger some one dies."

"That is true. But the man himself, Deep Thunder; I want to see him. Lead me to him."

"What young man want to see him for?"

"You shall know when we meet," was the equivocal reply. "Show me this killer! You must, I say!"

Deep Thunder looked for a moment into Ned Blake's face.

"Him look like you, boy," he said.

"I don't care for that. I want to see him!"

"Hate him, eh?"

The patience of the young avenger was almost exhausted.

"What are you going to do?" he said madly, clutching the Indian's arm. "I am not going to parley here till morning. Make up your mind in an instant. Agree to show me the man you have just left, or I will deprive Sitting Bull of the future services of another brave."

The sternness of the avenger's voice was not lost upon the Indian.

"Deep Thunder will show the young hunter, but he must not harm the white man who has avenged the blood of Dead Eye and his braves."

"I make no promises," said Ned Blake.

"Show me the trail."

The young Sioux turned, and with a motion bade the youth follow him.

The twain proceeded over the trail in a rapid walk, and kept on until the youth began to believe that after all the red-skin was deceiving him.

Not until the stars began to pale before the approach of another day did Deep Thunder check his steady gait.

"We have passed over miles of mountain trails," said the youth, whirling upon his guide. "See! daylight has come again. Whither have you led me, Indian?"

"The white killer walk fast, too," said Deep Thunder. "Mebbe we no near him yet."

"Not near him after that long tramp!" cried young Blake. "If I thought you had deceived me—"

"Look yonder, white face!"

The avenger turned and his eye glanced over the Indian's outstretched arm.

"Him found at last, eh?"

A cry of exultation burst from the youth's heart.

Standing within rifle-shot and outlined against the morning sky was the handsome figure of a man clad in buckskin and wholly unconscious of danger.

"It is he—the man who has killed my foes!" cried Blake. "A thousand thanks, Deep Thunder. I'll settle with him now!"

The young avenger's rifle leaped against his shoulder, and a moment later at the clear report that cleaved the balmy air, the figure of the man in buckskin fell back and disappeared!

CHAPTER XII.

BACK INTO THE LION'S JAWS.

"I've cleared my trail of all interlopers!" exclaimed the youth fiercely as he lowered the smoking rifle. "I can go back now and settle with the Seven Pards of Take-Notice."

He turned away with the eyes of the Indian fixed upon him.

"Deep Thunder no go back, then. White face can find the way," he said.

"No, you need not follow me. I want to be alone." And with the last word the young avenger left the Sioux alone on the mountain trail.

"White wolves soon eat him up," ejaculated the red-skin in a contemptuous manner. "Him go back an' find 'em, mebbe; then they will end his trail. Deep Thunder burn their strong wigwams, an' their scalps will yet hang in the lodges of the Sioux."

If Ned Blake had heard these words he might have turned upon the speaker who seemed disposed to interfere with his vengeance-hunt; but he had passed beyond hearing and a minute later was out of sight.

He walked rapidly over the back trail with the eagerness of one who was anxious to reach a certain goal within a certain time.

As for the young Sioux, he stood for several minutes on the spot where he had been so abruptly deserted, and then sprung suddenly to the right and in an instant was lost to view.

Ned Blake hurried on, keeping his face toward Take-Notice, or what was now left of it, and panting at times like a hound of chase.

"Mine at last!" he said more than once showing where his thoughts continually were. "If I had found that interloper sooner, I could have paid the whole ten for last summer's work. You shall be the first one, Captain Quartz, and Daisy Doll the last."

The morning brightened around the young avenger as the sun mounted higher, and saw him pursuing his way along the narrow mountain trails.

He did not halt until from a certain place in the trail he looked down upon the blackened ruins of the mountain den.

"That infernal Indian made no mistake," he said in audible tones. "He has forced the wolves to another lair which I will find. Nothing standing but a few logs that rise like negro giants from the ruins. Hal! somebody has been there since the fire. There's a piece of paper fluttering from one of the logs."

He descended to a level with the burned town and walked among the ruins.

When he stopped it was before a black log that stood upright like a pillar, and saw a paper pinned to it with a bowie.

His eyes were filled with curiosity as he reached up and tore it down so that he could read the writing thereon.

The next moment a laugh broke over his lips.

"You're a set of fools, men of Take-Notice!" he exclaimed. "If this paper was intended for me I accept the challenge; if not, I hunt you none the less. Seven of you left with the captain, eh? I wish there were ten, but I will attend to the seven."

He looked at the paper, and for the third time read aloud the writing that almost covered it:

"Blood for blood! Thar ar' seven ov us left with the cap'n, but we'll make things howl."

"THE SEVEN PARDS."

Defiance seemed to devour the youth's eyes, and stepping to the post again, he jerked the bowie from the wood, and folded the p'per until it was no larger than his hand.

Then holding it against the upright log with one hand, with the other he drove the blade through it, pinning it securely to the wood.

"That's Ned Blake's answer!" he hissed, stepping back to survey his work. "A bowie for your paper threat; bullets for your hearts!"

An instant later the crack of a rifle cut the air, and with a dull thud a bullet buried itself in the log, piercing the paper he had just pinned to it with a single blow.

Ned Blake wheeled in a second, with his finger at the trigger of the rifle he had just clutched anew.

"Who did that?—the seven cowards, I suppose!" he cried.

"Not the seven cowards, but five ov the fools ye've jes' been talkin' about."

Ned Blake saw the speaker a moment before he spoke; he saw, too, that he was one of five men who stood about thirty yards away, with Winchester rifles at their shoulders, and bronze cheeks at rest on the polished stocks.

"You're not the man we started to find last night, but you'll do. Hands up!" said the same stern voice. "You ar' flesh an' blood, an' not the ghost the cap'n thought ye war. Yer neck didn't lengthen worth a cuss last summer it seems; but we'll not fail this time. Hands up, boy!"

The command was too stern not to be obeyed in some manner, although Ned Blake seemed on the eve of defying the men who held his life at the mercy of their triggers.

"No foolin', my young card sharp. Do what ye ar' goin' ter do now!"

Grating his teeth, Ned Blake let his rifle slide to the ground, and elevated his hands.

What else could he do?

"Forward, boys. Keep 'im kivered, an' at the first move, operate the triggers!" were the commands that assailed his ears as the five advanced with military precision.

He glared madly at the mountain Pards as they approached, scanning the face of each with a look that told how deep-seated was the hatred he had cherished against them so long.

When they halted he stood within reach of their arms and all at once the hand of the leader fell upon his shoulder.

"An introduction is unnecessary, fer you know us all, boy," said Pawnee Pete. "We're not all hyer, though thar ar' two more livin' ones somewhar—Daisy Doll an' ther cap'n. You're a fool fer comin' back ter Take-Notice—don't you think so now?"

For a moment there was no reply.

"I know my business!" suddenly flashed the youth. "I am here and in your hands. You know now that you didn't finish the hanging job last summer."

"I reckon we didn't," said Pawnee Pete with a laugh. "I don't care who cut you down, neither do ther boys hyer. Ez I said awhile ago, we're not goin' to bungle the job this time."

"Do as you please! I expect no mercy at your hands."

"Thet's right, an' you'll not be disapp'nted. Hold the victim, Rocky Rube."

The giant who answered to this name stepped to the youth's side, and his hand closed on his left arm.

The other four stepped back a few paces.

Ned Blake faced them with unblanched face.

"It's bullets this time, not a rope," said Pawnee Pete. "Nobody shall cut you down in Take-Notice, fer we hold the hand that never jesses!"

"Heaven, is my trail to end thus?" thought the young avenger. "Shall the men who once forced me into a game of cards and then hanged me because I held the winning hand riddle me with balls?"

He glanced at the man who held him with

the grip of a vise, and knew that from him there was no escape.

"We give ye two minutes, pard," said Pawnee Pete. "It's long enough fer anybody to get in a word with the Judge. Two minutes! Now, go to work!"

The cold words and the brief time allotted did not make Ned Blake's head sink upon his breast.

With the eye of a young eagle he looked into the rifles of the men who thirsted for his blood.

"Time up!" suddenly called out the leader of the Pards. "Ef you hevn't said a word fer yerself it ain't our fault. Many a chap we've dealt with didn't get two seconds. Ready, Pards ov the mountains. Aim at his heart an' don't miss center!"

Rocky Rube seemed to glide an inch further from the boy's side, although his grip did not relax.

It was a thrilling moment.

"Hold on, thar! I'll take a hand in the game!" rung out a voice that startled all on whose ears it fell, and Ned Blake saw advancing from his right a man who was the equal of any of his would-be executioners in stature.

"It's Daisy Doll!" said Pawnee Pete, recognizing the new-comer. "I've an idea that he saved ther card sharp last summer; but he can't do it ag'in!"

All eyes were fastened on the mountain Pard who came forward with flashing orbs and a cocked revolver in his hand.

He walked straight past the leveled rifles and fearlessly down the line, nor stopped until he stood before Ned Blake.

"Let the youngster go, Rocky," he said, gently, yet in tones of command, to the rough who had been holding the youth for execution. Rocky Rube hesitated.

"You don't mean, Daisy—"

"Let him go!"

Daisy Doll's hand touched Rocky Rube's arm, and it fell back from the almost victim.

"See hyer, Daisy," suddenly thundered Pawnee Pete, striding forward. "We're playin' this game!"

Daisy Doll wheeled upon the speaker like a flash.

"I've taken a hand in it ef ye ar'!" he said, and a huge revolver was thrust into Pawnee's face. "Another step, Pawnee—another curse, an' thar'll be a funeral in burned Take-Notice!"

Pawnee Pete stood still.

CHAPTER XIII.

EXIT CAPTAIN QUARTZ.

It was evident from his look that the youngest of all the giants of Take-Notice was not to be trifled with.

When Pawnee Pete halted he was not more than four feet from the menacing revolver.

He might have thrown up his hand and dashed Daisy Doll's arm aside; but it would be dangerous to attempt the experiment.

The young giant stood between the roughs and the young avenger who was almost hid by the interferer's burly form.

"Ye war goin' ter try cold lead this time, war ye?" ejaculated Daisy Doll. "It strikes me that I got hyer jes' in time. You won't touch the youngster now."

Pawnee Pete's black eyes snapped again.

"Hang me ef I ain't stumped!" he exclaimed, trespassing upon dangerous ground. "You're the last man, Daisy, I thought 'd interfere fer ther card sharp. You must hev a reason—"

"I hev!" was the quick interruption.

"You helped ter hang 'im last summer."

"I did, an' I cut 'im down afterward, too."

"We all know that now."

"He wants my blood in spite ov what I did," continued Daisy with a quick glance at Ned Blake. "I guess he'll get ther dead drop on me at ther first opportunity. He's the feller that lassoed me ther other night, an' the chap I forced over ther cliff inter Death Valley. But no matter; I stand between him an' yer pistols. I say that he must go free!"

The dark-skinned auditors seemed too amazed to respond.

"Move off toward ther rock yonder," said Daisy Doll, addressing the youth in a lower tone. "Don't stop hyer any longer than ye kin help fer it's an unhealthy climate hyerabouts."

Ned Blake looked at the interferer, and then glanced into the faces of Pawnee Pete and his pards.

Daisy Doll's glance was a command, and he turned toward the huge boulder plainly seen from the spot he occupied.

"I kiver the boy's retreat," said Daisy to Pawnee Pete. "He's my deadly enemy I tell ye, but I hev helped him all ther same. Pawnee, you an' the boys kin foller me ef ye want ter."

The young giant moved after the avenger, but with his eyes fastened on the men-tigers he left behind.

Pawnee Pete bit his lips and ground his teeth.

"Ther mean skunk!" he fairly hissed. "He's no pard ov mine fer that act. What do you say, boys?"

He turned and strode toward his companions with the question.

"Tbar's suthin' in the wind," growled Rocky Rube. "Daisy an' the card sharp hev pooled their issues. It means a conspiracy ag'in Take-Notice."

Curses fell from the lips of all who listened to these words.

"No rest for me till I've settled with Daisy an' his boy pard!" cried Pawnee Pete. "He hev ther drop on me an' didn't use it, ther fool! I'm in fer makin' this ther bloodiest game Daisy ever played! You'll stand by me, pards?"

"Ferever, Pawnee!" was the response.

"I thought so. We'll let 'em think that we've let 'em go, but, like eagles, we'll fall upon 'em an' trump their hands with death's best kards."

Meanwhile Daisy Doll and his companion had passed out of sight.

They had not met since the separation on the elevated trail where one forced the other over the ledge, to fall himself a few moments later into the valley.

Not a word passed between them until Daisy Doll halted, deep in the mountains, and whirled upon the boy.

"Hyer we ar', pard," he said. "You've looked at me a thousand times since we left Take-Notice. Now, what do you think of Daisy Doll?"

Ned Blake stared into the giant's face, but did not reply.

He seemed to think it impossible that the very man whose life he had sworn to take should, at the risk of his own, save his.

"You hevn't lost yer tongue, hev ye?" resumed the giant, with a laugh. "I'm Daisy Doll, I tell ye—one ov ther Ten Pards ov Take-Notice. Go back to ther time we pulled you up to ther limb. What did you swear to do arter you got out ov that pickle? Come, pard, be a man. Don't forget that oath."

"I cannot," exclaimed the avenger; "but how can I avenge myself on you after what has just happened? Daisy Doll, you make me break my oath; but there are six left, thank Heaven! Those six lives will be vengeance enough for me."

"Lost grit, eh?" smiled the giant. "Wal, I didn't help you to-day to save my own head. Ef I thought I war that kind ov man, Colorado wouldn't hold me another day. I didn't help ye because I freeze ter ye in any way; but because a gal laid her hand on my arm last night an' said: 'Help 'im, Daisy, fer my sake.' That's why I stepped between you an' Pawnee Pete."

Ned Blake started with a low cry.

"Where is White Leaf?" he asked, anxiously.

"Foller me an' we'll see."

Daisy Doll started off again, closely followed and watched by the wondering boy.

The pair soon traversed a mile and Daisy Doll halted at what the youth knew at a glance must be the mouth of a cave.

"I'll show you ther boss girl ov this kentr," he said, smiling upon his companions. "The Injuns that came from old Sittin' Bull's camp for her will never go back ter report."

The twain entered the mountain cavern and found themselves in a place of spacious dimensions with a lofty ceiling and a dusty floor.

"She's not hyer!" suddenly exclaimed Daisy Doll. "She said she would stay till I came back. I made her promise that. It can't be that ther cap'n hev got loose—"

"The captain—captain who?" interrupted Ned.

"My cap'n—old Quartz. You see I came across him an' White Leaf at Take-Notice last night. The cap'n war mistreating the gal—war bound ter make her Mrs. Quartz, an' all that. Wal, I came up an' spilt his game, fetched 'im hyer, tied his hands on his back an' turned him loose. White Leaf kivered him with my revolver while I fixed his hands. Gods! but ther old feller did growl; but I told 'im that he war dangerous to let him run at large with his hands at liberty. We've been pards fer ten year, Cap'n Quartz an' I hev,

but somehow er other we've been driftin' apart since last summer. We must find the gal, my boy."

Ned was anxious to be assured of White Leaf's safety and the cave was searched, but without finding a single trace of her.

"Suthin's happened—I know it!" said Daisy Doll, starting toward the mouth of the cave. "Ef Cap'n Quartz got his hands loose, I'll cuss myself fer a week."

He led the way to the outside and once more stood in the mountain trail.

"Stay hyer a minute," he said to Ned, and before the you' h could speak, he darted away.

Ned Blake scrutinized minutely the wild landscape by which he was surrounded.

All at once he started and barely suppressed an exclamation.

He saw the figure of a man scarcely fifty yards distant.

The back was turned toward him, and closer inspection showed that the person's hands were tied upon it.

"Great heavens! it is Captain Quartz!" he cried.

The young avenger watched him awhile longer, but he did not move.

"Can I do it?" he asked himself. "He is one of the accursed Ten. The experiment is worth trying. I will try."

A minute later Ned Blake was crawling like a snake toward the unsuspecting man.

He did not lose sight of him for a second, and the nearer he approached the stronger grew his desire for revenge.

"I'll not strike you in the back, captain," he said in low tones. "You shall face me when you die for the inhuman deed committed last summer."

Ned Blake's crawl was being accomplished without the slightest noise.

His eyes glittered as he advanced, and one of his hands held the hilt of a knife which was half drawn.

Captain Quartz, bound as Daisy Doll had left him, seemed to be watching the movements of some party ahead, and was not listening for a foe in his rear.

The youth halted at last.

He was not three feet from Captain Quartz, and his eyes were fixed on the mountain outlaw's hands.

All at once the knife, now fully drawn, darted at the cords that bound the captain, and the next instant they fell apart, cut through by a single stroke!

The mountain Pard whirled with a startling cry, and recoiled when he found himself face to face with the young blood-trailor.

"Ha! hal captain, I've set you free!" exclaimed the youth smiling at the giant's amazement. "You called me a ghost last night. Do I look like one to-day?"

"It's you. I know you, cards-harp," grated the captain. "You're not goin' ter give me fair play."

"Why should I, captain? Did I have it when you dealt with me?"

A frown was the reply.

Captain Quartz was looking into the muzzle of a revolver which the youth had exchanged in a flash for a knife.

"I'm Ned Blake, and I am here for revenge!" continued the avenger. "I have sworn to exterminate the league of Take Notice. Another man who holds a grudge against you has cut the band down to seven, but I have brushed him from my path. He will interfere no more. Captain Quartz, I shall keep my oath from now on. I shall have the blood of the men who hanged me because fortune or fate gave me the best hand. I begin with you!"

The youth's eye seemed to glance along the barrel of the weapon which moved downward the breadth of a hair, and then—

A sharp shot rung out among the mountain foliage and Captain Quartz reeled away, shot through the brain!

"Baffled again!" exclaimed Ned Blake, well knowing that his enemy had not fallen by his revolver. "Must I kill another man before I find myself the Pards' only foe?"

He started in the direction from which the messenger of death had come, but stopped suddenly fifty feet away.

"The men of Take-Notice belong to me!" cried a loud voice. "I shall not stop until the last one has paid the debt ov blood!"

All color deserted the young avenger's face.

"My God! it is the man I shot at daylight from Deep Thunder's side!" fell from his lips. "I'd like to know why he hates the mountain men. They never hanged him, I know."

Then he lifted up his voice:

"Tell me why you hunt the Pards," he said. "Let us meet, and—"

"Beware! the men of the mountain league belong to me!" and the slayer disappeared as if the earth had opened at his feet.

Ned Blake, mystified, went back to the stalwart captain lying across the trail.

He was dead!

"Whoever that avenger is," the youth muttered, "he kills when he shoots!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THREE MORE!

THERE still lived but six of the mountain Pards of Colorado—Pawnee Pete and his companions, and Daisy Doll.

Four, as we have seen, had fallen before Bill Blake's deadly rifle, and he had renewed his oath to exterminate the entire league.

"Who fired that shot?" asked Daisy Doll, making his appearance to the young avenger shortly after the slayer's withdrawal.

"The man I thought I had brushed from my path," answered Ned Blake.

"Did he hit anything this time?"

"Look yonder."

Daisy Doll walked toward the corpse lying across the trail, and gazed at it for a moment.

"Blamed ef it ain't ther captain! An' his hands ar' loose, too!" he exclaimed.

The youth smiled.

"I did that part of it," he said; "but I did not get to carry out my purpose. That man stepped in and avenged his wrongs, if he has any to avenge."

"Haven't you an idea who that killer is?" asked Daisy Doll, curiously.

"Not the slightest. Tell me, if you know."

"I've got a good idea, but the girl knows," he said.

"White Leaf?"

"Yes."

"Then let us find her at once!" cried young Blake eagerly. "He shall not baffle me again; I am ready to swear he shall not. Think of it! Four of the ten have fallen before his rifle!—I have not got to slay one."

"Hyer's yer chance, pard!" and Daisy Doll drew his handsome figure to its true height in front of the avenger. "You'll never git a better chance ter begin than ye hev now. I b'long to ther hangin' squad!"

"No, no; you will make me break my oath! I owe you life instead of death. I will neither begin nor end with you."

And the youth put forth his hand as if he would keep back the man who had bared his breast for the avenger's bullet.

"Thet's more than the other one will do," smiled Daisy Doll. "Ef he gits a chance he'll serve me like he served ther cap'n back yonder. Life's a lottery in Colorado, Ned, an' the men what don't die with their boots on deserve monuments taller ner them sky-kissin' trees. But the gal! Let the killer go for the present."

Ned Blake did not object.

He was now doubly anxious to find White Leaf since Daisy Doll had informed him that she knew the name of the mysterious killer.

He had made up his mind that he would look out for the deadly marksman and settle with him at the first opportunity.

The shot at daylight from Deep Thunder's side he knew had not killed the living target, else Captain Quartz had not fallen by other hands than his.

In all probability the bullet had merely stunned the man-hunter, rendering him unconscious for a time.

Ned Blake and Daisy Doll turned from the spot, but not until the latter had dragged the body of his old leader from the trail and given it a burial better than any he had ever granted to his victims.

During the interment the avenger stood outside with his head turned away and waited for the rough to rejoin him.

"It's good-by, Cap'n Quartz," suddenly said a voice. "He war a man among men ov his kind, but the prize he drawed in life's lottery war a bullet."

Ned turned to find Daisy Doll at his side.

"The game gits hot from this point," continued the mountain Pard. "Pawnee Pete an' his boys ar' on ther war-path now. They've hed time ter reach this part ov the kentry ef they follered us right away. The reason why I left ye so sudden a while ago war because I thought I saw suthin' suspicious down yender. There it is ag'in!"

Ned Blake looked over the young giant's outstretched arm, and thought he saw something

moving through some bushes some distance away.

"It may be my rival!" he exclaimed.

"Ther dead-shot!—I think not," said Daisy Doll. "Anyway we'll find out who it is. When he gits to the point whar ther bushes ar' lowest, I'll halt him."

The rifle of the mountain Pard had already struck his shoulder, and Ned Blake held his breath while he waited for the creeper to reach the spot indicated.

A minute elapsed.

"Halt thar!" shouted Daisy Doll, and forthwith the figure of the creeper sought the ground.

"He acts like an Injun!" murmured the outlaw. "Git up thar, er stop a bullet—Quick!"

The tones in which these words were spoken were enough to awe the bravest, and to the youth's astonishment, a form rose above the bushes.

Daisy Doll was right; it was an Indian.

"No foolin', redy! March this way!" said Daisy over his rifle.

The red-skin obeyed, and Ned Blake all at once recognized Deep Thunder, the last of the band of twelve Sioux.

"White Face again!" exclaimed the young brave, recognizing the avenger. "Him no kill man in buckskin this mornin'."

"I know that now," said Ned.

"Him pass Deep Thunder back yonder 'while ago. His eye was full of fire, as if he had scalped a foe."

The youth bit his lip.

"Triumph over one he did," he said, and then Daisy Doll spoke.

"Let me git a word in edgewise, pards," he said. "Look hyer, Injun; whar's White Leaf?"

The young Sioux started at mention of the name.

"I want no lie," continued the mountain Pard, as sternly as before. "You warn't sneakin' through them bushes fer nothin', an' I kin read an Injun's look about ez well ez a white man's. Look inter this rifle bar'l, an' say ye don't know whar White Leaf is, if you dare."

Deep Thunder did not stand more than three feet from the weapon that covered his head.

"I don't like you, anyhow, fer you're ther hound what gave Take-Notice the match," resumed Daisy Doll. "Whar's White Leaf?"

"The white-faces will not let her go back to the red warriors' camp," said the Sioux.

"She shall go ef she wants ter," smiled the giant. "You're a sly Injun, Deep Thunder. We would hev found her in ther cave awhile ago if it hed not been fer you."

The Indian did not reply.

"If you know where White Leaf is, tell me," said Ned Blake. "You and I need not be enemies. You hate the mountain Pards; so do I."

"Deep Thunder will lead White Face to the girl," said the young brave. "He took her from the cave, but she is not far away. Come, white-faces."

"Thet's a sensible Injun," said Daisy Doll, lowering the rifle.

The Sioux turned away, and led the two whites toward the bushes from which Daisy Doll's leveled rifle had brought him a few moments before, and there revealed a narrow trail.

"Trail leads to White Leaf," he said, glancing at his followers.

For several minutes the little party pushed along in single file over the narrow path, or until Deep Thunder suddenly halted, and then drew back with an expression of alarm on his face.

"What's up now?" asked Daisy Doll.

"The white wolves are in the mountains."

"Thet means Pawnee an' his Pards," said the giant. "It's war to the knife jest ez I expected, Ned."

Speaking still, the mountain Pard advanced and after a look downward for the narrow trail was elevated above much of the locality he beckoned the avenger to his side.

"Thar they ar', the bull five," he said, describing with outstretched arm a group of five men within rifle-shot, but below their position. "It's a council-ov-war, boy. Look at 'em. Thar never came together in Colorado five bigger ner better pards than Pawnee Pete an' his boys. I say thet fer 'em, ef they do want my life."

Ned Blake gazed breathlessly at the men, and felt his temples throb, and the blood start like molten lead through his veins.

Each one of those desperadoes had had a share in hanging him a few months before, and he had sworn to have the blood of all.

Daisy Doll watched the young avenger's emotions with an amused smile.

He seemed to know what was passing through his mind.

"I see them all, Daisy Doll," Blake suddenly exclaimed, and the click of his revolver's lock followed the words. "The other avenger is not near now. Let me get in my work. I must settle with the men of Take-Notice while I have a chance."

He started forward, escaping Daisy Doll's hand and headless of Deep Thunder's remonstrance.

"I may never get a better chance!" he sent back over his shoulder. "By Heaven! I will cancel the debt I owe!"

He had thrown himself from the trail and with eyes of fire was springing toward the council-of-war among the mountains.

"Men of Take-Notice, I am here!" rung from his lips in accents that made the desperadoes wheel. "This time the tables are turned, and nobody outshoots me as was done awhile ago."

Nobody?

"That's a mountain lie! The last five mountain Pards belong to my rifle!"

Ned Blake stopped and uttered a wild cry which was drowned by the report of three swift shots.

"Gentlemen of the rope, this is Bill Blake's revenge!" continued the same stern voice, and when Ned glanced toward Pawnee Pete he saw three figures on the ground, and two men flying down the trail.

"Run for yer lives an' save yerselves fer ther next shootin'-match!" followed the fugitives. "The decrees of Heaven can't save ye from Bill Blake ov Gila Ranch."

The young avenger stood spell-bound, with the undischarged revolver in his hand.

He saw the buckskin-clad figure of the killer as he stood in full view not far away, and even noted the lightning flashes of his eyes.

All at once the burly figure of Daisy Doll landed at his side.

"You know 'im now, pard?" the rough exclaimed.

Ned started like a person suddenly roused from slumber.

"Know him? My God! that man is my brother!" And as the buckskin slayer disappeared the revolver dropped from the young avenger's hand.

CHAPTER XV.

CORRALED.

"HALT! what's ther use ov runnin'?" and Pawnee Pete, the speaker, seized his big companion by the shoulder and halted him without ceremony.

They were some distance from the spot where Bill Blake had broken up the council-of-war with those deadly shots.

Pawnee's companion was Rocky Rube.

"Thar's only three ov us left, Pawnee—three out ov the Ten! In fact, thar's but two, fer I don't count Daisy Doll ez one ov us now. He's taken up with that boy, an' we've lost him forever ez a Pard. You an' I fer it now, ag'in' Bill Blake. Shall we stay an' play her game through?"

"Yes!" almost thundered Pawnee Pete, and his eyes flashed as he spoke. With seven dead Pards behind us, we're goin' ter stay! By heaven! it is you an' me, Rocky, sure enough."

The two men had recovered their breath and were ready to meet the slayer from whom they had just fled.

They knew that Captain Quartz had fallen, for they had discovered the lone grave made by Daisy Doll's hands, and a brief inspection had told them who it contained.

"Thar's no use to record an oath, Rocky. We kin kill just ez well without one," said Pawnee after a short silence. "Let's go down to the big cave an' rest thar an' fix up our plans. I hevn't been thar fer a year, but I guess I kin find it."

The two men started off, Pawnee Pete in the lead, and after following the mountain-trail for an hour, they drew aside some vines and entered a cavern.

"Hello! somebody's been keepin' house hyer!" ejaculated Pawnee, in tones that startled his companion, whose face and form the lighted match revealed. "Hyer ar' our names on ther wall, an' across three ov 'em is a dark-red mark."

Rocky Rube sprung forward and stared at the names just discovered.

"We're in Bill Blake's retreat!" he ex-

claimed. "He crosses a name out when he kills its owner. See! Bowie Bill war his first victim—that's a mark across his name."

"It's a solid fact, Rocky."

"He'll come back ter mark out the others mebbe."

"Ov course he will!" and as if a footstep had assailed his ears at that moment Pawnee Pete put out the light and clutched his pard's wrist in the darkness.

"We'll wait fer 'im hyer!" he said in whispers. "Fortune hez shuffled the cards an' we've got ther best hand. I didn't expect it this soon, Rocky; but no difference! We'll play it just ez well."

The two mountain Pards felt their way along the wall until they reached a corner of the cavern.

It was partly filled with large boulders behind which the Pards did not hesitate to creep, and make themselves as comfortable as possible.

"Now fer the man we want, Rocky. It's only a question ov time. He's bound ter come!"

Yes, Bill Blake the slayer was at that moment approaching the trap which had been set for him; he was going back to the cave to record the last deadly work of his unerring aim.

"Three more—only three!" he said to himself. "I'm goin' to leave Daisy Doll for the last, as I said I would when I started out. More than once have I baffled that boy who wants the blood ov the Pards ov Take Notice almost as bad as I do myself. I wonder who he is? They did not hang his brother as they hanged mine; they never struck him as hard as they struck me. Three more, Bill Blake—then away from the scene of your revenge!"

The slayer traversed the trail with eager and elastic step.

He was wildly handsome in his close fitting buckskin suit, but there was a frenzied glare in his eyes which would have riveted the attention of the most casual.

His blood-hunt had driven him to the verge of lunacy; for days and nights he had thought of nothing else, and all his plans were for the extermination of the mountain Pards.

Men had told him that the ten roughs had hanged his brother, little more than a boy, but not for months after the event.

This news had reached him on a ranch near the banks of the Gila.

"I'll have ten lives for that boy's," was all he said, and that very night the Gila Ranch missed Bill Blake and his rifle.

We know how he entered Take Notice in order to mark the men he wanted, how he won Captain Qaar's dust, and then knocked him senseless with a thousand in gold; we have seen the workings of his revenge throughout our romance, and now we find him, madly triumphant, near the end of his trail.

Eager to draw the recording mark across the names of his last victims Bill Blake kept on until the cave was reached.

He pushed the vines aside and entered.

"Hyer he is, Rocky," whispered one of the Colorado tigers who had waited for him with patience a long hour. "He doesn't dream thar we're hyer. Let's see what he's goin' ter do first."

The sound of footsteps in the gloom told the secreted Pards that their foe was coming on; then all at once they saw a flash of fire and the match showed him to their gleaming eyes.

Bill Blake stepped to one side and took from a stone shelf a prepared torch which burned freely after awhile, and with it in his hand he approached the wall.

"I cross 'em all out but three an' they'll soon follow," he said halting before the ten names. "Thar they ar'!—all marked out but ther names of Pawnee Pete, Rocky Rube an' Daisy Doll. I'll go back to Gila Ranch afore long satisfied, an' the other avenger kin stay hyer ef he wishes to. Blood fer blood! Ef I don't hold the winnin' hand in this game, I hev never lived an hour."

As the last words left his lips Pawnee Pete's shoulder touched his companion.

"Now!" he whispered. "Get ther drop on him. I'll bring him to time."

The next moment the figure of Pawnee Pete rose above the boulder.

"Hello, pard!" rung out his coarse voice. "We've set up a cold deck on ye, an' all ther trumps ar' in our hands."

Bill Blake recoiled at the first words as if a thunderbolt had dropped at his feet.

He saw his peril in an instant, but his eyes did not lose any of their bravado.

"All but three, eh?" continued Pawnee Pete

in tantalizing tones. "It strikes me thet you're goin' ter git to the end ov yer trail sooner than you expected. Drop thet torch if you dare. It shows us the head we're goin' ter bore through an' through!"

At the mercy of the mountain Pards the slayer of Colorado stood for a minute like a statue.

The light of the torch showed him the situation of each and enabled them in turn to cover his head.

The hand which had leaped to his revolver at the first alarm still rested there, for the weapon had not been drawn, as if he knew that the drawing of it would seal his own doom.

"Three it is!" he said. "I am Bill Blake as you know. Seven out ov ten is not bad work. A little more time an' I'll complete the list."

"No doubt ov that!" said Pawnee Pete. "That we're not fools enough ter grant you more time. You sha'n't hev another minute!"

The shutting of the rough's lips hard behind the last word told that the crisis had arrived.

Not more than twenty feet separated the mountain foes.

There seemed no escape for the slayer.

All at once the torch came down like a falling meteor; it flashed blindingly in the faces of the two Pards, and so suddenly that the fingers at the triggers could not work!

The next instant it shot straight into their faces, hurled by a madman's hand, and passing between them like a rocket, was dashed against the wall in their rear!

At the same moment Bill Blake vanished!

All this was the work of a second, as it seemed.

Blinded by the flash, and staggered by the torch itself, the two Pards went to the wall behind the boulders.

The flambeau burned fitfully at their feet, for the wall had deprived it of much of its fire, and where the slayer had stood was darkness impenetrable.

"Hal! hal! when you cover a man after this, drop him without ceremony!" suddenly laughed a voice that made the Colorado Pards grind their teeth. "We'll see who wins in the end, Pawnee. Don't forget ez ye go along, thar ar' three more names ter be crossed out yet."

The voice died away just as Rocky Rube was about to fire in the direction from whence it had proceeded, and at that moment the torch went out.

Half an hour of silence followed.

The Pards knew that Bill Blake had not quitted the cavern, but as they could not see their hands before their faces, they could not define his position.

"Suthin's got ter be done," whispered Pawnee Pete at last. "I'd sooner face a den ov rattlers than stay hyer. We might ez well bring things to a head. We war fools fer not droppin' him without a word. Now we've gotter fight it out in ther dark."

"I'm with yer, Pawnee."

"Put up yer revolver, then, an' grip yer bowie."

Rocky Rube obeyed, and with the noiselessness of two serpents the last survivors of Take-Notice crept forward on the most desperate venture of their lives.

Pawnee Pete now, as always, had the lead.

Ten feet beyond the stones they halted and listened.

Not a sound assailed their ears.

The silence was enough to betray them by the beating of their hearts.

"Listen!" whispered Rocky Rube, as a very slight noise was heard. "He's movin' on our right. Bill Blake—"

The sentence was never finished, for a hand dropped upon Rocky Rube's shoulder from out the darkness, and something cold touched his cheek.

"This leaves but two!" said a stern voice, which was succeeded by a flash and a dull report.

Pawnee Pete sprung to his feet.

"I'm left yet—ther wors' pill in ther box!" he grated, as a bound carried him forward.

But in the gloom he missed his man, and the descending bowie cut only the close atmosphere of the dark place.

Ten feet from the spot Pawnee picked himself up, and after a while crept back.

Suddenly he felt a mangled face, and he knew that but two of the Ten were left.

CHAPTER XVI.

BEFORE THE LAST MAN.

THE desperado clutched his bowie with a firmer grip, and turned with a tigerish growl to the left.

"I'm hyer, braced fer ye, Bill Blake!" he cried madly. "I dare ye to fight me, knife to knife, in the darkness!"

There was no response.

Had the slayer glided from the cavern after killing Rocky Rube?

Pawnee Pete's senses were on the alert, but no pistol-flash cut the gloom again and no enemy leaped upon him.

"A sneakin' coward just ez I expected!" growled the mountain Pard. "Sneak back to the Gila Ranch, an' tell yer cowboys that Pawnee Pete backed ye out."

Finding that he could not elicit a response of any kind, the rough crept forward and down the corridor which led to the mouth of the cave.

Nobody interrupted his progress, and he found himself, at last, in the bright light of day.

Bill Blake had undoubtedly taken his departure, and no doubt was already far down the mountain trail.

"I'll get 'im yet," said Pawnee, going back into the cavern. "It's only a question ov time."

This time he struck a match, and found his last pard dead where the avenger's revolver had left him.

With one look he turned away.

Out into the daylight again passed the burly figure of the Colorado ruffian.

There were lightning flashes in his eyes.

"I'm worse than the Ten put together!" passed over his lips. "By Jove! Bill Blake, I'll make ye curse the day you begun yer manhunt in Colorado!"

The mountains swallowed him up, as it were, but his great shadow fell athwart the trail as he hurried along.

A few hours later the figure of this same man might have been seen flitting from bush to bush with his gleaming eyes fixed on a certain object some distance ahead.

His movements were noiseless and assassin-like, and the hand that carried a revolver kept one bronzed finger at the trigger.

All at once the creeper stopped and let slip an oath of disappointment.

"Pshaw! it's an Injun!" he exclaimed. "But it is the red skunk that gave Take Notice the match. When you can't find a b'ar mebbe you kin kill a snake."

He leaned forward and watched the young Indian, who appeared to be resting, for he leaned against a tree about twenty yards away, and wholly unconscious of Pawnee's nearness.

"Hello, reddy!" suddenly cried the mountain ruffian.

The Sioux turned with a start and found himself covered by the giant.

"I'm goin' ter settle with yer fer the burnin' ov Take-Notice," grated Pawnee Pete. "Take yer medicine like a man, Injun—no flinchin'."

There was a sharp crack at the end of the last word, and the young red-skin leaped into the air to fall back, shot through the brain.

"Thet's bizness!" said Pawnee, going forward with a smile of triumph on his dark face. "I'll settle with Bill Blake just ez quick when I git the drop on him."

"Mebbe ye'll never get thet drop," said a voice.

Pawnee, who was stooping over the dead Indian, straightened at the first sound.

"Throw down yer six-shooter, Pawnee; I'm goin' ter give you a chance," continued the same voice.

"With the bowie, Bill?"

"With the bowie."

"Down goes the shooter, then!" and as the Pard's revolver struck the ground he drew his bowie and braced himself for the fight.

The man who had startled him was the slayer, and as he stepped forward he exchanged his revolver for a knife similar in construction to Pawnee's.

The giant towered a head above his antagonist; but Blake was well built, and, from appearances, as agile as a cat.

He took lengthy strides, as if eager to come in contact with Pawnee, who awaited him with savage eagerness.

At last they stood face to face like two gladiators, the left foot of one almost touching the right of the other.

"This is to be a duel to the death!" said Pawnee.

"If I kin make it so it shall!" was the response.

"What shall the signal be?"

"We need none. Consider the fight open now. Let the man get in the first lick who kin."

"Thet suits me."

A moment had not succeeded the last word ere the bowie of the mountain Pard shot upward and then swooped at the slayer's heart.

To avoid the stroke it seemed next to impossible, but the hand of the trailer met the descending arm half-way, and although at the risk of losing his balance, he checked the human thunderbolt.

The two men fell apart the next moment, and glared at one another like tigers.

Blake's eyes taunted Pawnee Pete at his failure and the look was madly returned.

"Ef thet's yer game I'll try another card," said Pawnee under his breath, and all at once he dashed at his foe with the bowie lifted no higher than his thigh.

Quick as the new charge was, the slayer tried to meet it.

He struck not at Pawnee's body, but at the arm that guided the knife, and the whole length of his blade seemed to pass through the rough's wrist.

"They do thet charge on the Gila sometimes!" he said derisively, and as Pawnee Pete fell back painfully wounded he leaped at him with the ferocity of a mountain lion.

Pawnee Pete attempted to keep him off, but in vain.

They came together in an instant, and the giant found his knife-arm pinioned to his side by the arm of his foe.

"I gave ye a chance, Pawnee," was hissed in his ear. "I swore never to do thet for one ov yer crowd; but I've broken my oath in thet respect. Thar'll only be one ov the Pards left in a minute—Daisy Doll."

Pawnee Pete tried to get the advantage of his enemy; he attempted to trip him but in vain.

"This fer ther boy you helped ter hang!" accompanied the blow that swiftly followed and the burly man who staggered back dropped a bowie whose point stuck in the ground as he fell heavily!

"Who says that I left Gila Ranch fer nothin'?" said Blake. "Only one more left—an' he the one I promised ter save till the last. Thar's no grave fer you at my hands, Pawnee. By to-morrow night I'll cross out all the names on the wall of the cave."

The slayer walked away leaving his last victim where he had fallen.

The mountain vendetta was at an end; there remained alive only one more member of the league of Take-Notice.

The wild gleam which had lighted up Blake's eyes was wilder than ever now.

The man seemed to be growing mad as if vengeance had turned his brain.

He went straight to the cave in which Pawnee Pete and Rocky Rube had lately confronted him.

Torch in hand, he stepped over the stiffened form of the latter, and drew a mark across every name but one.

This action seemed to give him a fiendish pleasure, for he laughed as he performed it until the dark recesses of the place threw back the echoes.

Night was throwing her pall over mountain and valley again when Blake left the cave.

Eager to complete the wildest scheme of revenge man had ever conceived, he knew no rest.

Down the mountain again toward the ruins of Take-Notice!

Did he expect to find the last man there—among the old haunts like a restless spirit?

The stars saw him flit from ruin to ruin, and the winds heard the incoherent sentences that continually left his lips.

All at once he stopped and hugged the blackened timbers of one of the caves.

"Will you ever build Take-Notice again?" asked a voice.

"I ruther guess not," was the reply. "Hyer several ov ther boys war wiped out, an' hyer, too, we hed flush times. I'll leave it fer the owl an' ther buzzard. Pawnee Pete an' Rocky may want to live hyer, but ez fer me, boy, I beg ter be excused. Thar's three ov us left now—"

"Thet's a lie!—thar's only one, Daisy!"

The figure that shot forward landed at the side of one of the parties who had just come up.

Daisy Doll involuntarily recoiled a foot, but a hand dropped on his arm all the same.

"Ye'r the last one, Daisy! I've left ye till the last!" continued the same stern voice. "I'm Bill Blake from Gila Ranch!"

"My brother!" exclaimed Daisy Doll's companion, darting forward. "You shall not finish Daisy. I owe him my life!" and the youth sprung between the two men forcing loose the

slayer's hand and causing him to utter a cry of consternation.

Bill Blake seemed dazed by the revelation he had just heard.

"My brother alive? It cannot be!" he said. "I had a brother once, but the Ten Pards swung him twixt heaven an' earth an' I hev terribly avenged him."

"But I am that brother. I am Ned Blake!" persisted the youth.

"You. Let me see yer face."

Daisy Doll struck a match and held it before his young companion's countenance.

The slayer leaned forward and tried to fasten his eyes on the features thus revealed.

"It is a lie! You look like Ned, but they hanged him, I say," he cried. "Ah! you have not got a scar on your shoulder like my brother had."

The youth turned to Daisy Doll.

"Here, Daisy, open my jacket, quick!" he said. "There! hold the light near my shoulder."

The next moment a wild cry rung out on the air and the slayer sprung back and quivered like an aspen.

"It is Ned! I have killed for nothing!" they heard him say.

For a moment he stood erect like a man, then striking his forehead with his clinched hand he staggered back, and sunk to the ground.

"He is dead!" cried Ned Blake, rushing forward followed by Daisy Doll.

"Dead? no! he's worse than thet," said the mountain Pard. "He's mad!"

And so it was.

Bill Blake's trail had ended in madness!

CHAPTER XVII.

GILA RANCH AGAIN.

We last left Ned Blake and Daisy Doll among the mountains looking for White Leaf, the Sioux captive, with Deep Thunder for a guide.

We know that the Indian brave fell by Pawnee Pete's aim just before his fatal duel with Bill Blake, and now we find the last of the mountain Pards and Ned in Take-Notice, but without the girl.

Deep Thunder, true to his treacherous nature, had given them the slip, and was probably on his way to the place whither he had taken White Leaf when Pawnee's weapon put an end to his existence.

The sight now exhibited among the ruins of Take-Notice was a pitiable one indeed.

Bill Blake, the slayer, was mad, and Ned turned his head away when he encountered the mad stare of his eyes.

"We can go back to Gila Ranch now," said Daisy Doll, addressing the madman.

He started at sound of the name.

"Are they all dead?" he asked.

"All!"

"Daisy Doll among them?"

The giant nodded.

"Then we will go back. The mountain Pards will never hang my brother again!"

"Now for White Leaf!" whispered Daisy Doll to Ned. "Then we will turn our faces toward the old ranch, an' this poor man will find rest at last."

Half an hour later the little party was deep in the mountains.

Bill Blake offered no resistance, but moved along with the rest.

There seemed to be some hope for him, and Ned thought that the old ranch on the Gila would exert over him a beneficial influence.

"Look yonder!" suddenly exclaimed Daisy Doll, pointing forward. "Ef my eyes don't deceive me, thar stands the very girl we're hundin'!"

The young avenger could not suppress a cry of joy.

"You are right, Daisy. It is White Leaf!" he said.

The next moment the figure which the giant's keen eyes had descried vanished from view, and the hunters darted forward.

"Hyer we ar'!" exclaimed Daisy, catching a glimpse of a flitting figure before they had proceeded far.

The young girl turned and uttered an exclamation of surprise, and a minute later she stood before the trio, relating the story of her abduction from the cave by Deep Thunder and her late escape from the place to which he had taken her.

Bill Blake listened to the narrative in a dazed sort of manner; his eyes had lost their old fire, and were now as soft and mild as a child's.

"Vengeance has been had and yet there is no human gore on your hands," said White Leaf to Ned, to whose side she had stolen at the first opportunity. "Let us hope that the future will give him back his mind. The mountain Pards deserved death anyhow, and the twelve Sioux whose hatchets I know have killed our people."

Ned did not reply for a moment.

"I came hither to kill," he said when he did speak. "I thought I had a right to pay the men of Take-Notice back for their treatment of me, but I never dreamed that my brother had been told that I was dead, and was also on the trail of vengeance. If he regains his reason the last of the mountain Pards must keep his distance." And Ned glanced at Daisy Doll who stood near by.

Several months later three persons seated on a porch in front of a well-to-do ranchman's house in Texas were approached by a man on horseback.

The shades of night were falling and behind the rider the landscape was growing dark.

"The crisis has come," whispered one of the trio on the porch to a beautiful young girl. "Our visitor is Daisy Doll, and Bill is about to meet him."

The next minute the horseman drew rein in front of the porch with a jovial "Hello!" to the three, and got ready to dismount as if he were certain of a cordial welcome.

Bill Blake started at sound of the voice and rushed forward, while Ned and White Leaf held their breath.

"Hello, William, I'm back ag'in!" cried Daisy Doll, putting down his bronzed hand to the man who had halted beside the horse.

For a moment Bill Blake stared into the horseman's face and then almost crunched the hand in his palm.

"It's all right now, Daisy!" he exclaimed. "May you long be the last ov ther Ten fer what ye did fer Ned!"

A loud shout pealed from Daisy Doll's throat as he looked toward the interested spectators on the porch.

"Blamed ef he isn't all right once more!" he exclaimed. "Hyer I am, Bill. Accordin' to yer oath I war to hev been the last ov ther boys ter be wiped out. They're all gone but Daisy. I won't lift a hand ter stop yer."

"I've killed enough!" said the slayer. "I am glad that my wild oath shall forever remain unfulfilled."

Need we say that there was joy on Gila Ranch that night?

Reason had come back to the mad man-hunter of the Colorado mountains, deep in whose recesses lay dead the men whose wicked deeds merited the fate that had overtaken them.

Not long after the incident just related a mistress was formally installed over the ranch, and at the same time Ned Blake took unto himself a wife.

Thus Sitting Bull's camp lost the most beautiful prisoner it ever contained, as well as twelve of the bravest warriors of the Sioux nation.

For Dead Eye and his braves had failed in their mission, and, instead of conveying White Leaf back to her prison, they helped to make her Ned Blake's wife.

Take-Notice remains as we last left it; but the memory of Captain Quartz and his mountain Pards will cling to the blackened ruins forever.

Daisy Doll, the survivor of the league, is a native of Texas, and frequently visits Gila Ranch, where he is always welcomed by the man who once wanted his life.

THE END.

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